Year Five

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Year Five

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Summary

“All the palace chambers are not lovely, light and bright. In the walls of our hearts and brains, danger waits. There are holes in the floor of the mind.”
—Hannibal, 2.13 "Mizumono"

Professor Crawford takes a new approach to Will's lessons, and Hannibal doesn't approve of the toll it's taking on him. Will discovers some truths about Hannibal that might have been better left in the dark, and meanwhile, someone has been watching them both *very* curiously.

And of course, lots of fluff along the way.

Hogwarts AU. This is part of a multi-fic series, we update three times a week. Read from the beginning here!

Chapter 1

Will

Hannibal,

Well, it's officially been five hours since I've seen you.

The flight attendant (kind of like a waitress, for a plane) just asked the guy next to me if he'd like a beverage. Judging by his breath, the answer is only yes if she has a few of those little glass bottles of well-whiskey, since I'm pretty sure he bathed in it this morning.

HA—I was right. I kind of wish she'd offer me one. Too bad I can't do magic for another three months…

Do you ever really try to avoid talking about something, only to have it pop up accidentally, over and over again because it's all you can think about? Is there a word for that? I feel like there must be. I'm sure you know.

Planes are fascinating. Did they talk about them in Muggle Studies? 300,000 lbs, just soaring through the air at breakneck speed. Carrying me home. ~~Away from y~~

Do you get a lot of fireflies, in France? Probably not in the city, I guess, but I can't even picture summer without fireflies. My grandmother calls them "lightning bugs." I think she'd like you. Although I'm sure she'd pinch her face, tut, and tell me you're too thin, as though it's my fault. I'd like to see that. I'd like to show you the house, too. My dad is so proud, you should have seen all the work we put into it last summer. It was the only thing stopping me from going insane ~~while you and I were~~

Anyways, I hope your trip is a little less tedious than mine has been so far. I doubt your aunt has made you take muggle travel, at least, so you're probably already home as I'm writing this. What posters and pictures are hanging on your walls? What's your favorite place to sit with a book? Where have you worn the floorboards down from pacing? (Or is it only me that does that?)

I guess I may as well say it. Not to sound like Victoria Evans novel (hey, I had a LOT of free time on my hands last summer, okay) but it was really hard to say goodbye at the station. I think we held it together, just the briefest of lips brushing, a murmured "see you soon" that I have tucked away in this cluttered brain of mine, but the whole time my stomach was churning, my limbs rebelling at the thought of letting you go. If I seemed distant, withdrawn, it's only because if I let myself start to really think about the long, empty days without you—

There it goes again; pesky little thought. I'm starting to realize why they call it "love-sick," I feel genuinely pathetic. Or, I guess I could be getting a contact-hangover from the man next to me, who just pocketed one of the little bottled whiskeys. Let's go with that.

Signing off, in favor of an Ursula Le Guin. No hard feelings, you're still my favorite, but I think maybe if I lose myself in another world, for a bit, I'll have a better chance of shaking the melancholia that is tempting me to break international magic statutes and attempt apparition right now, witnesses and all. (Not that my seatmate would notice, he's pretty close to passing out like a House Elf after a few butterbeers.)

76 days…

Will

Chapter 2

Hannibal

Will,

It is not exactly one word that you are looking for, though I would suggest, ‘suppression’ in broad strokes. But, in essence, yes, you are correct. Psychologically, the muggles have found, the more you attempt to keep yourself from thinking of a topic the more it will rise to your awareness. The scientific term, (yes, I study science, do not pretend you are unaware, simply because I did not know how a motorbike worked...I have had no cause to study those objects, but people are people whether magical or not.), the scientific term is ‘ironic process theory’—so aptly named. If you fight not to think of a topic, you are in truth, already thinking of it, and are only more likely therefore to think of it more.

They offer for this greatest of maladies, a handful of solutions.

Firstly - select an absorbing distractor and focus on that instead. Hrm. Well, that will not work. Nothing could possibly be more absorbing than thoughts of me. (Are you sticking out your tongue? terribly rude.) I have decided against this one, I do not think it would work at all. No absorbing distractors for you unless they have four legs, or gills, (but are not mermaids.) Promise me, please. No, you do not have to promise me, I am only being...well...I miss you.

Secondly - Exposure. Think about it. Evidently, this will hurt, but ultimately, it will make the thought less likely to creep up on you whilst you do not expect it to. Well. I do not wish you to hurt. I do not wish you to be unhappy at all, do not be unhappy, Will. You are lovely when you smile.

Thirdly - Meditation. Well, you ought to be doing this to strengthen your occlumency at any rate. You know Crawford will expect you to have practiced over the summer. ~~You know he would like you to move on to legilimency as soon as the year starts.~~ We will not discuss what else you know at present. Clear your thoughts, that is acceptable, and you needn’t even pretend a river, now that you will have all your real ones at your disposal.

Fourthly - Write to me at all earthly hours of the day and night. Even if you have already sent a letter, even if you are waiting for my response, I want every moment you wish to tell me. I want all of it. I am terrible and greedy as you well know, and I miss you. I believe I already said, but I am not engaging in such things as suppression, I believe instead my Aunt has termed it “wallowing”. I think that is a good deal more whiny than what I am doing; stoically and fiercely missing you, but it is not right to argue with a Lady.

I trust that by now, you have left that terrible, stinking man and his drink long behind you. I do not like that you were forced to sit next to him. Perhaps next year someone more worthy will occupy the seat by your side. I hope he did not encroach your space, or offer you one of those bottles his greasy sounding fingers smeared prints all over. I am wrinkling my nose at

the thought of it. Though I know you quite enjoy the flavor of the drink. But do not get yourself into trouble, drinking was not listed as one of the acceptable ways for either of us to contend. Though I admit, I am having a glass of wine as we speak. Weaknesses. One of my few. But the other is so far out of reach. I miss you.

Planes are...I do not think either one of us actually wish to discuss planes, except that I have the utmost contempt for them. Though I am fond of fireflies, they are not in the city no, but we have a house in the countryside as well, where they are plentiful amongst the roses. It is quite beautiful, perhaps I will paint it for you when we go next. It will not be quite the same loveliness, the way they flit through the perfumed air, the warmth of the sun still in the soil, the crickets that sing. My Aunt says that in Japan, the crickets were far more musical, but I have no comparison yet, and enjoy the notes of the ones we have here. Perhaps I will convince her we should travel, since she misses her home as I miss you, at least one of us might find some respite. She of course, would take to you as well. You are already some kind of hero in her mind, as though you have triumphed on some extraordinary feat. (You have). I do not disagree with her and only work to encourage the notion. But I will have your grandmother know, that though I am slender, it is you who forgets to eat. If I did not remind you during the last of our weeks, you would have happily survived on coffee and—wrinkling my nose again—Elfie's Elven Crunch Snacks, for the rest of term. Terrible, you are, I miss you, terrible.

My favorite place to sit is by the fireplace in one of the back rooms, unused but for when I am here, quiet and comfortable, landscapes on the walls, though I did not choose them. My own room is a bit...well it is still quite sparse. This is the first time I have ever considered it my own enough to want to put anything into it. Perhaps I will see what I might find. At least some art, I think, would encourage some sort of distraction.

I do not know of your Le Guin character, though I am glad to know she does not hold a candle to my place in your affections, but you know that I always condone the reading of the classics. The Iliad, I think, had some rather interesting notions on the affairs of man and god. Yes, yes, I know, you are rolling your eyes, though I also know you have already read them. I know more than I let on, just as you do.

And, well...

No parting would have been right enough. No way of leaving you would have changed the fact that that is what was occurring. We both handled ourselves admirably well given the situation, and if you were distant, I did not notice it for being too much so myself. You know the entire concepts behind caring are enough to confuse me for days, much easier though, to explore them in pen on paper than in speech. And now, all of that torrent of emotion and it AGAIN it aches. Stings, and hollows, pushes through me without respite. The long, empty, days, as you— But there is an end in sight this time, and so it is wholly worth every moment of rattling breath. To me, in any case. Very much so. I miss you. You are not pathetic, no more than I. And I am never, as you know, that. (Are you smiling again?)

In any case, I believe I have tired you long enough with my "too terribly perfect" handwriting. (Complain and I shall make it even smaller.) It is late here, and I should sleep,

but without you, my mind wanders in all sorts of poor directions, and I admit, I never quite know what the night will hold. ~~It is important for you to be with your father, but it would be so much easier if you were~~

Nevermind.

Goodnight Will, I miss you.

Hannibal

Chapter 3

Will | *Interlude*

It is home, but it's not home.

It's relief when we turn onto the road, branches dragging lazy fronds across the roof of the car, gravel crunching beneath. It's the dappled light of the yard, my dad grabbing my trunk from the car, and it ***is*** *good to smile with him. His hair is all salt and pepper now, long days of working outdoors have browned his arms and drawn lines across his face that weren't there, even the last time I saw him. It stings of everything I'm missing.*

The kitchen smells like this morning's coffee and the gulf, then the living room with the same faded blue furniture we'd lugged from apartment to apartment my whole life. Bathroom cupboards holding bar soap and cheap aftershave, I take a minute to check it's still the same, and when the cabinet swings shut my reflection looks dolefully back at me.

And my room…

It's completely untouched, like I just left yesterday; there's even a lone sock dangling from the top drawer, trapped when I slammed it shut in my hurry last September. The realization that Dad probably hasn't even come in here since I left settles hollowly.

Duffel eased off my shoulder, I leave it at the foot of the bed.

"It's good to have you home," Dad says, claps me on the back. He lingers there a moment, his eyes soft, and I know that this is him saying he loves me. I nod, as I am meant to, no words wasted in the Graham household.

Home.

Now though, I am alone in a room awash with moonlight, faced with the prospect of an empty bed. Sleep is light years away. Beneath the jet lag, the weariness wrung through me by an entire day of travel, there is the sick, nervous feeling in my stomach that comes before exams. The bed and I face each other down. This town ain't big enough for the two of us*, I think, madly.*

I try though, call up my inner protagonist and settle between sheets that smell familiar and comforting, and not at all like Hannibal. Worn flannel wraps around me, air-conditioning cool, not warmed by another's skin, drawing my own heat out for a second. Eyes shut, almost forgot to take of my glasses, christ I'm a mess, but Hannibal—

And there it is. All day, I've been floating, somewhere far above what's happening, in typical Graham fashion, watching our fingers drag apart for the last time, too scared to watch him walk away, so I hurry, and I'd done a damn good job of not missing him, or at least not noticing that something was scrabbling panicked nails across my ribs, tearing. But now, I

think his name, and suddenly it hits me that there is a definite absence of arms wrapped around my torso, mouth pressed to the nape of my neck. It is so cold and stark, and suddenly I am so terribly, awfully alone.

Legs curl up almost of their own volition. I tuck my arms over, bury my face in the detergent scent of the pillow, breathe, just breathe. I try to will sleep into taking me, where a week ago I was trying desperately to fight it, and it only throws my solitude into greater contrast. Brights and shadows, all shades of missing him.

Minutes pass, maybe an hour, who knows, and I can't just lay there miserable, letting the fear of three months draw wet tracks down my face, so I get up again, toss the covers off, disgust, and scrub brusquely at my cheeks. Something to do, anything, and when I look around to find nothing I can tinker with, no books I haven't read, no cleaning to be done, not when I've only just gotten home, my eyes rest on the trunk at the foot of the bed. I don't want to touch that. It holds my textbooks, my wand, forbidden things that are a part of that other life, and have no place here.

But the duffel full of my clothes; that I can handle.

I unzip it and begin pulling things out, feverishly almost, hands and mind glad for the distraction, however small. My journal falls out, looking a little worse for the wear these days, and then, nestled among the tees and flannels…

A glimpse of green. I stop, my hands brush at the wool thoughtfully, reverently. He didn't…

Of course he did. And as I pull the green and silver sweater out, I think I've never been so grateful to anyone in my life. Still sitting in a nest of my clothes on the floor, I slip it over my head, soft and rough at once against my bare skin, and sigh, eyes closed, almost able to pretend he's here when his scent, spice and sandalwood, fills my lungs.

Sleep comes easier then, though still restless. A sweater is not arms, it is not him, and it is frankly masochism of the sickest kind to rest with my own arms, swimming slightly in wool, wrapped around myself. But it is something, at least. And exhaustion is heavy, dragging my eyelids down at last. I hope, if I dream, that I'll find him there.

Chapter 4

Will

Hannibal,

My dad hates owl post. He's asked once or twice who I've been sending so many letters to, without any real intent to pry. We've never talked about these things, so just as I said nothing when I stumbled upon a box of tampons under the sink last summer (No such signs of a female presence now, I've noted) I answered "Hannibal, dad." as though it were the most obvious notion in the world, and he just raised his brows, "hmm"ed, and went back to his crime thriller.

I'm disappointed to say you do not have a future in the muggle art of psychology, Mr. Lecter. I've considered your coping methods and found all of them to be a distinct failure. Distraction has its merits, putting all thoughts of autumn out of my mind in favor of something else, but always, it drifts back. If I'm working on the car, hands and clothes black with grease, the tang of motor oil and gasoline coating me, I invariably think of how you would shudder at such mess, tut when I unwittingly sweep a line of tar across my cheek when I adjust my glasses. Any book I pick up now, lost as I can become in their worlds, I can't help but imagine spreading myself slouched and comfortable across you. Every protagonist looks like you, all the words need to do is mention how his eyes glimmer with mirth and I have put you in their place, even in the most ridiculous depths of fantasy or sci-fi.

Exposure. Well. This one doesn't work at all, let me put it that way, except to send me mulling into a dark mood that even Dad notices, tired and withdrawn as he often is when he comes home from work. I have been warned not to attempt this again, or else I'll be shipped off to Memaw's in the city, where an owl would be more noticeable and less welcome.

I found I like meditation, although you might not call it that. I find myself most at peace when walking the shore at night. The town we live in is a tiny strip of land, flanked on one side by the bay, and the other by the gulf. Here, at night, when the water is smooth obsidian-dark, and the shore gleaming white, I walk the line between the two, footprints fading under the tide as quickly as I make them, and it's almost like not existing. I am empty of everything, but most importantly, I am empty of the thoughts constantly spreading thorns through my head. I'm not afraid that the other world doesn't exist, as I used to be, but sometimes it still becomes unreal, far away, and when the future dances out of my fingertips like that, I am terrified that it will never come, just this endless stretch of summer. Hot and gray and unwelcome, and totally, terribly lacking your presence.

Unfortunately, even those silver nights staring at the shore are not untouched by you.

And lastly, of course, there is writing. I feel… stilted through words sometimes, but it's something, at least, to tell you these things like you're here with me. Your voice brings relief, even in ink as it is currently trapped, almost comforting in its familiarity. Once, this was the

only way that we spoke. It's strange to consider now, after all the quiet murmurs and fire-lit confessions that we've shared (not to mention my preferred language, with you—touch) that we could have ever been so separated, but here we are again, talking through text, and it's not as bad as it was, because I can finally spill these thoughts. I would have told you then, if I thought you would do anything but wrinkle your nose at me, but I can tell you now that I—well, that I miss you. That I'm constantly thinking about you. ~~That I~~

In other news, I got my learner's permit. I'm learning to drive stick, which my dad insists is the proper way, but I'm not so sure. I kind of thought driving would be like flying; instinctual, body just knowing what to do. As it turns out, it's a lot less like flying and a lot more like kissing. I'm nervous, and feel like I'm just fumbling around blindly at first—but then, when it works, *oh*, does it work.

I've only driven up and down our street so far (and once in a parking lot) but the first time the Volkswagen stuttered to life and roared down the road, gathering speed as my hands and feet changed gears madly, fanatically, I whooped, loud, exalted; changed, myself.

Granted, my dad was there too, supervising, and I stalled it a few seconds later, so maybe it's less that it's like kissing than I made it seem. (Hopefully?)

I hesitate to even write about things like that. As you've pointed out to me before, I am very good at avoidance. Not the best coping mechanism, maybe, but better than the sharp, paralyzing ache I feel when I realize that you're not here with me. That these are things I can't have again for months still; your voice, your touch, your kiss. Your eyes on me, amused, and making me flush, some exhilarating mix of embarrassment at the intensity, and pleasure at being enjoyed so. I work during the day, with my hands, with my mind, *things* constantly, problems for solving. Anything, so I don't need to examine what can't be fixed in me.

I found your gift in my bag, the first night home. I—

Thank you. I don't have the words to tell you how much I needed it.

Dad is calling me downstairs now, he seems to be under the impression that a meal at Memaw's will cheer me up. It's a long drive, and I'm hoping he'll let me take part of it. Distraction again, if only momentarily successful.

Awaiting your next letter, already,

Will

Chapter 5

Hannibal

WILL...WILLIAM? WILBUR? WILHEMENA?

Whatever your name elongates out to, consider yourself addressed as such.

Did you, or did I only just imagine in some miserable flash of desolation—because even you could not be so entirely absurd—truly just compare kissing me to driving your hideous metal contraptions? Those large spewing things? That roar ungracefully and spew smoke on occasion, dirty and claustrophobic. You...you must have, you *did*, dear lord, whatever have I allowed myself to succumb to. A car. I am *NOT* a car. I am setting this pen down to cross my arms and glare at dolefully at this paper, Winston thinks I am absurd. But I am not the absurd one.

But. I suppose that bit about...what was it, stuttering to life beneath your scrambling hands, hrm? I might abide by that.

I miss you. And yes. Yes, I pick that point to dwell on first, because it is entirely an indication of how lacking my life is without your oddities. Here, no one steals away my clothes, forgets to put away their shoes so I trip when I get off the couch, smears dirt along my face and destroys the neatness of my hair. I would tut if I saw you all smudged and sullied, but it would not be your own face you would sweep a line of tar across, I can assure you of that. … I would give a fair bit to be smudged by you. And though I do not appreciate mess, you know I have a fondness for anything that fascinates you, and imagining you bent over a motor, muscles working, sweat flushing your skin…

Well. You have taught me appreciation for the finer points of messes, shall we say. The ways in which they can make one's life brighter, if created by the right hand. That is NOT an open offer to disturb my life, do not grin at me like that. I miss you, I am simply saying; you bring your brand of chaos, and I am left suddenly empty in my unmarred order without it. Do you think you could focus on your work with my, ehm "glimmer of mirth" so present on you. If I am a glimmer of mirth, you are a crooked smile. Or perhaps a mischievous glint. Both of those seem well alive in texts, distractingly so, I agree.

But I do not know if I would disparage my psychological capabilities as of yet, I think I would make a fine doctor of the mind. I did tell you distraction would fail, did I not? Because there is nothing that could possibility be enough to distract from me. I did, say, yes. You didn't listen and attempted anyway, you should listen to your Doctor, Will. I believe I also told you I did not wish for you to be sad. If I did not, I do not. I do not wish for you to be sad, if you are, if you allow those dark moods, I will be most displeased. You would not want to see me be that, would you? Terrifying consequences might come of that. For instance, the increased need for your laughter come autumn, to make up for lost time, you understand, it

might have to be induced… And you so *adore* being tickled, I know. So I warn you also, do not attempt again. Already I am two for two on my advice, a winning score.

If you were forced to visit your grandmother's I would find a way to post letters in the muggle fashion. But it would be so unpleasant to deprive Winston of my charming company and leave him only trapped with you. I believe we had best avoid such a situation, altogether. I am sorry your father dislikes this means of communication, but it is the most convenient. You know that I am not one to put in much effort to endear myself to those around me, though I do not see how they could be but, but I do...do wish for him to approve, generally. I am very much aware you have a strong respect for his opinions.

(Are you disappointed that the female presence has fled? I know that you worry for him. My Aunt has been alone for some time, but she does not seem to miss my Uncle quite...quite like I long for you. But perhaps that is because you are you, and I am I, and I do not know that anyone else could be more strongly meant to inhabit the same space. I miss you.)

Your ocean sounds lovely, in the way that all untamable nature is so. I should like to see it, stretching endless, though I do not fancy it wiping away existence, especially not yours. There is a certain shudder that arises when one cannot see the whole of a thing, the secrets hidden in the depths. But if it eases you, than I am glad for it, for its particular kind of magic and the way it thrums through your mind. But the summer will end, of course it will, its dull glare pared into chill. Time has its way of bringing you around, even as it winds out of all control, it will push us back together, and we will forget we were ever parted at all. At least, so I tell myself. But I am certainly real, and would not allow such a thing as summer to stand in my way. If summer will be endless, then I will find you even in it. Do you think a season would stop me?

Though I confess, it does...seem that way. Some nights.

My days seem stitched together by the mark of your words, stamped only by the presence of new ones or the lack. I am distracted for a time by wandering in the markets of the city, buying new ingredients to challenge myself with, new sensations to play across me, more, more, *more* until I am overwhelmed with them. But as you say, that does not last very long. You touch everything for me as well. Though I think...fortunate, would be how I would label the ache. A fortunate constant ache in me, you are. But I have always had a strange appreciation for the way every emotion resonates...perhaps driven by having lacked them at all for so long.

It is funny that you say such things about words. I have been dwelling on that myself. But at least then I had your voice, if you did not have mine, your patient huffs, your elegant eye rolls. It is something and nothing though, a paradox of its own. I try to tell you everything and yet I know I could not possibly. (I try not to dwell on that point.) I pour myself into a letter and yet no sooner do I, and I continue on, and already I have missed sharing a part of myself with you. It is no way to think, but I miss you.

I would...not have wrinkled my nose not even then, at first. Perhaps I would have. I might not have believed you. I quite obviously could not respond like this in kind. But only because only you might have even unearthed these things and dragged them to the surface, perhaps they did not even exist at all before you shaped them in me. I do not know, it scarcely

matters. You think of me and I think of you, and even with all of these torments, that is a peace. I know at least, I am not alone in this darkness. Somewhere, you are right beside me.

I...

My voice and touch , my kiss, all of me, truly, is yours, even if you cannot have them. Just as your flush is mine, my enjoyment of you. And I do so. Enjoy you. There is nothing to be fixed in you. You are entirely radiant. I would kiss you, if I could. I do not believe I ever thought I would be consumed by such a need.

A gift, you say? I could not let you forget what is yours.

I hope you successfully filled that need of yours to kiss with your car. I hear it is quite the same thing.

Hrm.

I miss you.

Hannibal

Chapter 6

Will

Hannibal.

“Hideous metal contraption???” That is no way to talk about a lady. She is… elderly, sure. A little ungainly, fine. But to call the Volkswagen a “Large spewing machine?”

I’ll have you know, she is shocked. Hurt, even.

Although, I might have laughed at your stammering indignance. A reaction I haven’t often been the one to draw out of you, another color of Hannibal Lecter to add to the ever-growing palate. And I only wish that I was closer, the better to taste my offense on your lips. *Give me my sin again*, isn’t that how it goes? A sentiment I relate to deeply.

Hello. I miss you.

I am glad though, that you opted not to make the obvious joke about me stalling your engine with my apparently badly expressed metaphor, because I would have had to find a new, more emphatic way to roll my eyes. Before quickly panicking that maybe it was only half a joke. (Do I? Do my inelegant words ever ruin the moment? God, I hope not. Maybe I’ll just stop talking. With my voice, at least.)

I would love to see you try to distract me from the Volkswagen’s inner workings. Not because I don’t think you’d succeed; far from it. I’m pretty sure just your presence would be enough to turn me into a hazard. But the attempt… that would be enjoyable.

Doctor Lecter. That has a nice ring to it. Maybe you should consider a muggle practice, *Doctor Lecter*. I don’t know that your aunt would approve; isn’t there a general distaste for muggle doctors in the magic community? I guess one that plays with minds instead of scalpels might be a little more appropriate, but still.

And my dad doesn’t dislike you, only the… presents that Winston has a habit of leaving in the driveway. He likes to roost under the house when he’s home (we’re on stilts, since the water is so near, remember?) and that’s exactly where my dad parks his car. Hence the dislike of owl post. I’m not even sure he remembers your name, despite the constancy of it leaving my mouth. He’s not the most attentive, especially when it comes to relationship matters.

Hm, the mysterious presence. Well, it’s not that I would mind someone else entering our life, I think it’s long overdue. He had girlfriends, a few, when I was younger, but nothing that lasted longer than a trip to the beach or day spent in the city. That I know of anyway. I think that now that we have a solid home, we’re not gallivanting up and down the coast like we used to, he could probably use some company that doesn’t “roar ungracefully” (no, I wasn’t talking about me. I see that smirk you’re trying to tuck away).

I like the image of you wandering through sun-warmed alleys, picking out what suits you, rejecting what doesn't. Isn't that a normal day for you? I'm lucky I make the cut, I guess. (Teasing, I can't help it. It's less fun when I can't see your put-upon frown though...)

We did stay at Memaw's, for the weekend, and her food does actually do a lot for my mood. The spices, things hot and tangy and sometimes bitter, surprising, they blend warm and welcome on my tongue. Her company does the same thing for my mind as her food does for my belly: comforts. I mentioned you, unavoidable, bragging about your drawings, probably. (I wish you'd let me see those ones you keep tucked in your journal, rather than just your marginalia in Charms, amusing as those doodles always are.) Her watchful eyes caught me over the pie she was slicing for my dad, who had made his way out to the balcony.

"Is Hannibal your friend from school?" she asked, and warmth flooded my cheeks, protests half-formed in my throat as I tried to figure out the best way to explain to my grandmother how completely inadequate the word 'friend' was to describe what you are to me. Before any of them could claw their way out (thankfully), she seemed to notice my trout-mouth, and smiled, crinkling the paper-soft skin at her eyes.

"Oh. A *special* friend, then."

I find it important to clarify, here, that I don't think the addition of 'special' makes it any more sufficient, but I was too stunned to scramble for a better term. I just shoveled a forkful of pie in my mouth and nodded.

She smoothed a hand over my hair, warm, smelling like lemon dish soap, burnished from years of use and abuse, and hummed.

"It's good to fall in love, *cher*. And it's about time; seems you wrote that boy every day last summer."

That seemed to be all she had to say on the subject: that we were inevitable. Though there was a pleased glint to her eyes, blue and sharp, when she regarded me over coffee the next day, listening to my thrilling (and much edited) tales of "prep school."

I'd like for you to meet her someday. And Dad, and the Volkswagen, cruel as your words for her have been, and the waterfront, and the winding roads and rivers, and the fireflies. Mostly, I want you near me again.

And exhilarating as driving is, it doesn't get my heart racing quite like your hands on my hips, pulling me closer, or the way my name sounds as a plea. Which is a good thing, I guess, for the rest of the drivers on the road with me.

God, September is such an awfully long way away.

Will

Chapter 7

Hannibal

Will,

Hello. Hello, I miss you too. Hello.

But I am much concerned. You are going to stop talking with your voice? How then, do you presume to talk? Have you another voice that I do not know of? I do not know if I can approve of such things, I have grown very fond of your voice, and I can only imagine what another summer past will do to improve it. I have no wish for another one. Now if only you had said that you would stop talking with your mouth, I might have asked if you had another one you planned to use, and then there could have been some very crude jokes attempted indeed.

You do very much, uh, what is it...stall my engine? I do not even truly know what "stalling my engine" means...but you are welcome to put your hands all over mine. How is that? Worthy of emphatic eye rolling, I hope. I do so wish to inspire responses in you. I think it is not really a joke at all, but what one might call an innuendo. Heavily implied that I wish you to do all manner of things to me. Am I terrible? Promise me you will continue talking with your voice. I have been bereft of it for far too long, I expect it ready and waiting for me when we are reunited. Along with the rest of you.

Eye roll? I think not. I imagine more of a deep flush.

Though I am unsure that a car can really be masculine or feminine, I am quite enjoying picturing you with a bit of a plump older woman. I hope your hands find solace in her...machinery, which is neither, er, hideous, nor metal…(I do believe it is metal, though. I am merely commenting.) But however she is, and however much you like her I will have to steal away your affections at the soonest possible moment...Must we truly refer to it as her? Fine, fine, you are glaring, you know I cannot bear to see you glare, (unless it is for my own amusement), *her* it is. You are lucky letters from you put me into fine spirits, I do not believe I have smiled this much since the last time I wrote, consuming, my lips turned up at the thought of even a car and I cannot help it. What you do to me, it is beyond any understanding. I am so entirely yours, it ought to be scary perhaps, but it is not. But—what you said, about my indignance being stammering. You, sir, are quite wrong. My indignance is, like the rest of me, perfectly polished and a tad smug. More of an *Excuse me*? with a quirk of brow, than a slipping and sliding all over my words (In the fashion *some* of us prefer, ehm.)

God, look at me, I'm utterly ridiculous, I am so happy to be writing to you. Someone ought to attempt to brew this, they would make fortunes. But I find it doubtful anything even remotely close to the real sensation could be produced. Potions cannot recreate ~~lo~~ human emotion very well. Only pale imitations.

Though perhaps I could create one for your issues with grace. I do not know that I have personally ever heard you roar ungracefully, as you say, yes, I am smirking, but I would be more than excited to experience such a thing should the correct opportunity present itself. You may roar as you please in my presence, if it pleases you. I would take a graceful roar, or an ungraceful one; a step of your toes on mine if it meant that it marked you close instead of far. But I know, I know, it is good that you keep your father company, I am glad the both of you have settled into something more of a home for yourselves. I do not have the clearest memories, as you know, of what it was like to be without one, but I only know that I much prefer with. I am not sure how I feel entirely about him not recalling my name though. I am rather memorable, you know, I would dare to say. But I suppose sometimes adults have a way of failing to listen. Just last summer I corrected Lady Deveraux on her pronunciation of Vivaldi. I suppose if his name can be forgotten, mine can as well. (Though he is a bit trite.)

I am teasing, also, a bit. But I am unsure I enjoy your particular brand of it. You are not lucky that you make my cut, you are the cut, you are the bar on which everything else is measured. If I had to draw a scale of Hannibal Approved items, it would start with Will and follow only then with fine music, expensive wine, and the sweetest of fruits. Do not be foolish; I no more picked you than I choose to breathe. We simply are. The ingredients at the market I do pick though, and god forbid they sell me short. I had to make a return trip to the butcher three nights ago, and I will say, it did not end kindly for him. Now I am really smirking.

Your Grandmother seems as though she is a very clever woman, much like my Aunt, who daily inquires after you in the hopes of tricking me into stringing more than two words together. An exaggeration, but I do seem to have a rather lot more to say when you are on topic. (Perhaps you can convince me to show you my drawings when September comes. I will generously allow you to try, hrm?) And it is pleasing that she does remember my name. I would like to meet her too, and your Lady Volkswagen. And your father, to convince him I am worth another thought. The roads, the river, and the fireflies, and mostly you in them. I will plead your name to our heart's content then.

Lost together, wherever together is. Perhaps next summer...

But the conversation you described with your Grandmother leaves me with a set of final questions and they are as follows.

Am I your friend?

Or you special friend?

Or are you falling in love?

Yours,

Hannibal

Chapter 8

Will

Hannibal,

~~I thought that I had made it pretty clear I don't think that friend covers i~~

~~I want you to know that I care about you a~~

~~More than anything in the world, I want you~~

Hannibal. Of course you are my friend. Of course you are my "special friend," whatever the hell that means in Memaw language.

But I can't say that I'm falling in love. If it is a place you can go, trip, stumble, *fall*, from not being so at all, to being entirely lost, then that's a journey I have already made, some time ago.

Of course I am in love with you.

That being taken care of, hello.

My voice. Well luckily, you can hear my dulcet tones again sooner rather than later; we are finally nearer to Platform nine and three quarters than the start of this summer. Save me a seat? I promise, I'll roar, whisper, laugh, whatever you want, then. I don't think I could stop myself, if I tried.

Um, stalling an engine is—it's generally not considered to be a… heh, well I'll let you figure that one out on your own. On my part, I'll just be here, quietly wounded.

My letters put you in good spirits? I do like you smiling. Terrifying as it sometimes is. It pulls a thread somewhere in me, unravels my perpetual aura of "don't talk to me" and spills happiness in return, I can't help it. You know, the only times that I've been hit on at school have been right after seeing you? (With the obvious exception, but she was very determined, and not at all put off by surliness for some reason.) I think that it's the only time I look like a person who might like to be complimented on his eyes. Don't worry, I did say "looks like," and I think for my many faults I am far from vanity. Polite indifference is all they get, mingled with amusement at the attempt. I can almost hear you growl at the thought. You know, jealousy doesn't suit anyone, Mr. Lecter, but it is a shade lovelier on you than most. And don't pretend you don't receive more than your fair share of attention, I've seen girls and guys alike follow you with their eyes, though only the very bold approach. That

Hufflepuff last year; what was his name? Fred, Floyd… *Franklyn*, that was it. He seemed *very* determined to catch your eye in Divination; that stunt with the cheese especially was very uh, forward. I have to confess, although I was laughing, I was secretly pleased to see you shut him down like that, as you do everyone else.

What does that make me? The very boldest? Or just lucky?

I don't know how you get away with correcting adults. Honestly, I do on occasion, and when I was younger I—well I had a lot less control over my empathy than I do now, and so I had the unfortunate habit of revealing truths that they would rather keep hidden. But I have grown to hate that withering look you receive, as if I could not possibly know anything better than them (I firmly believe I am the foremost expert on Hannibal Lecter though, including the sub-majors "places where his skin freckles", "the way a laugh wraps around his face", and "where to find him if he's angry with you".) What's your secret? Do they try to make you feel as small as they make me?

I am glad to have a home as well. Although… well, this is going to sound ridiculous, but I think that I prefer my other one. I feel like I'm split in two; the part of me that does just wants to be here, always, then the part that would really rather squeeze into the window seat in my dorm (although I'm afraid I'll have outgrown it soon). But always, with you. Whether I'm here or there, the desire for your company is the same.

I'd like to hear this story of the butcher, in full. I enjoy watching you be intimidating. I'm probably sick in the head, I'm pretty sure that's not a natural reaction to the cold, calm look you get just before you tear someone down with your words, but it ripples through me in shivers that are not the frightened kind. Fascinating, I think I would call you then. Dangerous, yes, but not to me, and so I only find you terrible and beautiful. So please do regale me, if not in your letter then later, with your voice: how did your trip back to the butcher go?

I think that we will not do another summer like this. I don't know how, but we'll figure something out. I can't—

Well, we'll see. Remember, we're almost there.

Love,

Will

Chapter 9

Hannibal

Will,

Well. You might have said then. If you were. And saved me the trouble of scratching it out half a dozen times in our previous exchanges. You know I am not fond of scratching out; it leaves the paper so terrible marred and crumpled. I would prefer to have my clean lines, but I could not presume, that, how could I?

I am in love with you as well, of course, as much as I know what it is like to be so. Much as another sense, I suppose, as seeing or touching, you do not know exactly what they are, you could not precisely define them if asked, but acutely you know you are touching or seeing. (tasting?) That is how it is. I do not know how I am aware, but simply it is fact inside of me, that I am in love with you. A new reflex awakened, a set of signals in me that suddenly rose to life and now are an unalterable fact. I am in love with you, I shall now proceed to write it as I please. Good, that makes me smile as well.

A smile that would please you, I should think. Though, whilst on the topic, I did not know about the changes my presence wreaks in you. Make you suddenly desirable, do I? Well I shall have to have a care not to leave you too much aglow or however will I manage to keep you from all those adoring fans milling about? Perhaps I should begin to leave more than just the effervescent light of my happiness on your skin when we part, so they are more fully aware of what your current status is, with regards to them. I have a very accomplished set of teeth hidden in my smile, you know. I do not worry though. I do not worry, much, I know that you are more than capable of dismissing them on your own with an unimpressed curl of your lip.

Much as you should not like my imperturbable fury, I should not like your surly arrogance quite so much, when it makes its appearance. You'll forgive me if I do not routinely compliment you on your eyes, but if you would like for me to begin accosting you in hallways, I believe I could be moved to such action. Jealousy is a creature that is only brought on by you, though it roars with a mind of its own. It is relatively quiet now, the images you present more amusing than anything else, because I am in love with you and you me, of course, but I cannot safely speak for the outcomes of what might happen if I were to witness such an act.

Are you jealous? You know I miss their eyes and anything else they send into my path. You are not so much bold, nor lucky, as Real, I would say, as few others are. More than dust and air and light, a person to reach out for. The rest I only notice, well...when they irritate me or somehow find themselves unfortunately in my line of sight. Though I have obviously warmed to the notion of physicality, I do not see any reason for a hand to suddenly land itself on my shoulder. No matter how nicely formed they are indeed. (One cannot disagree with truth.) I would call it rude.

Which trails back to the butcher. Well. I do not think it wise to put too much on paper lest it fall into prying eyes. So I will growl it into your ear at the next opportune moment, (closer and closer), but suffice to say he thought that as “a boy” I could not tell the difference between a quality cut of meat and one, shall we say, supplemented with what can very nicely be referred to as, suitable for feed.

He may have waved his charming knife around, and I may have worn that rippling look that you adore so much, but it is not my fault it slipped from his hand. That was just his clumsiness, what is perhaps my fault is the sudden unforeseen spoiling of his wares. But I do not admit to any part of it. He should also have not insulted my Aunt in the meanwhile. Needless to say, he no longer frequents the market. The new butcher is a much more suitable replacement. And as it turns out, a good deal of the other merchants are scared of me now. The freshest ingredients for the best prices, should that not always be how it goes?

I think I am dangerous. But I do not think I could ever be so to you. Though I do not know how you believe you can write to me of shivers while being so far away. Leave me to experience them in kind with you far. You, as the expert on me, should know better than to cause us both such need. But you are, I agree, the one who knows me best. Gift or not, you are more aware of me than I am…

But tell me, Mr. Graham, as an exam. Where would find the freckles on my skin? How does a laugh wrap around my face? Where would you find me in a particularly vicious mood? Twenty minutes remaining, full marks expected, you do not want to have to stay back do you? I should very much wish to advance you. I shall await your completed answers at my desk.

I am smirking. But I will not let myself get carried away.

What you lack in the subtle art of manipulating adults, my dear Will, is charm. It is all very easy as long as it is elegantly done. If you stumble over your words or allow their glances any merit, then they will clutch to their superiority with their taloned fingers. You are perfectly capable of such a thing though, but I like you as you are; a little clumsy, hair a mess, glaring and reddening. You are so incredibly powerful and they all overlook you. Fools. Only I know the truth of your strength. And it is glorious.

I do not think it is ridiculous that you are split. I am far less so. I have a great deal of fondness for my aunt, of course, as well as for Hogwarts, but I only truly wish to be where you are in truth, and would if necessary forgo both of the aforementioned to be so. We will not part again like this.

Love,

Hannibal

Chapter 10

Will

Hannibal,

Hm, teeth and pressing marks into skin, tasting and touching.

How long until school starts again?

I am jealous, at times. I’m only human, and it doesn't help that in the last year you finally seemed to break into the lead as far as height goes, that your face has grown sharper, curves and edges that weren't there before, that the slope of your shoulders is distinctively pleasing. Of course I haven't been the only one to notice, and you know I'm full of side-eyed glances. They are a specialty of mine, along with eye rolls and smirks and general sarcasm, which I'm glad you apparently enjoy.

The butcher sounds like he had it coming, whatever "it" is. Are you purposely trying to sound ominous now? Appealing to the strange attraction that I confessed, I see your methods, Mr. Lecter. Shamefully obvious. Don't stop.

I am the expert. Is that in question? Well, if I have to prove myself. Though I think twenty minutes has likely long passed since the ink dried on your words. Is twenty minutes really enough time for me to answer those questions in full? I wouldn't think so, but I'll have to try, I guess.

Your skin freckles only at your shoulders, very faintly. When you come back to school every year, you nearly glow with sun, and so I imagine that the light marks sprinkling there are where the sun has kissed you most. You might have noticed me doing the same. I am far from a beam of light, but I'm glad you let me press my lips there anyway.

A laugh warms you completely. I'm not talking about a smirk, a huff, but the rarely seen belly laugh of Hannibal Lecter. Do you remember when my potion boiled over third year, and burned my shoes into sandals? You laughed then and it was like clouds breaking, light splitting the sky. I couldn't even hold the glare I was dutifully trying to send your way, if you remember, I joined you after a minute and we would have lost points for both our houses if the professor hadn't been so shocked herself.

And though you are rarely mad at me, anytime you are in one of your trademarked moods, I follow my feet to the nook just before the restricted section in the library. I will no doubt find you at that table for two, your feet crossed, books that you have no intention of reading spread across the table's surface to discourage would-be solicitors for your attention. This is also how I know you're not angry with me; even here, you let me into your spaces, allow me to pull up a chair and tease about the paper fortress you've built, lean my shoulder against you, distraction that I am.

How are my marks? Is this graded on a curve? Who am I competing against, or is this all solely for your pleasure? I wonder how you would rate on a similar test. Do you think you are the leading expert on Will Graham?

I can answer that; yes, you are. I know for a fact I've whispered things to you in the quiet of the common room that I've never told another soul, and I don't think there's anyone as interested in looking at me as you. (I still don't understand that fascination, but hey, there's no way I'm going to call it into question.) However, if you decide you'd like to prove it to me, I wouldn't be averse to hearing some of your wisdom on me.

Counting the days now, instead of months,

Will

Chapter 11

Hannibal

Will,

I believe we are encroaching upon three weeks. If you would like the count in days, hours, minutes, seconds, milliseconds, and moments, I will be happy to furnish this for you. Otherwise I will continue pretending I am not desperately keeping track, and maintain my illusion of mildly aloof stability. Only to shatter it by reminding you that I miss you.

I must say, I greatly enjoy this poetic waxing you have become prone to. The slopes of my cheeks, the sunshine quality of my smile. I only pray I am truly worthy of your prose; I believe myself to be attractive, but mostly only to you, because you are truly strange. Well formed, I grant you, but I think my features mostly confuse, though I am glad you enjoy them. As you well know, no one else even begins to matter but you. Shall I wax on about your glowing eyes? Your twisted storm of a head of hair? I could write something sweet about your elfin stature, now that I tower over you so. You are adorable when you glower. I am in no position to laugh, because I am quite certain I paused in my work last year, or perhaps midsentence, to simply look at you. And more than once told you that you were... exquisite, I believe the word of choice, radiant. You are still, even though I cannot see you. Far more kissed by the sun than I am, certainly, tan, and muscular, irresistible. I am pale and strange, you are lovely. (Though if you would only allow me to comb your hair...)

The butcher is breathing, he says with a shrug of his shoulders and a bit of a grin. Is there really more necessary to be told? I appeal to nothing, I am simply me and you like it. I like that you like, so perhaps I do appeal. But I enjoy catering to your whims, you look at me ever so deliciously when I do. I never tire of those gazes from you. But I don't think you need to hear about the unpleasant encounter with one of our schoolmates...do you? Perhaps you're right, I do attract some sort of untoward attention, but only from those who fancy to themselves that they can understand me. (Morons with no taste.)

As a student, Mr. Graham, you managed to question every single one of the clearly outlined portions of the exam. The question, the title, the purpose. Terribly out of line, I must say, terribly naughty of you. I do not feel at all that you gave me, your professor, the weight of respect I deserve. No curve for you, nor any of that goblin whiskey that I so thoughtfully purchased for you when we visited the mines last week. I am sniffing.

But yes. Truly for my own pleasure, the horrible vanity you play into as no one else could. I would not have cared that someone knew how to break into my fortresses or peer behind my walls, before I allowed you to do so. And on occasion, the reminder is welcome, warms me, pushes that new sensation—we agreed, Love, being *in* love—awake and aching, terrible it is to know someone knows you, and comforting. To think that you think of my laugh and my scowls, the freckles on my skin...I - I wish never to experience how it would feel to know that is not so.

My apologies, you were mocking me and instead I grew serious. But I know I do not need to explain the leaps of my thoughts to you.

Full marks then.

And yes. Yes I am the leading expert on Will Graham. I dare anyone else to attempt to come forward and combat my statement. It will not end kindly for them. I know what you have told me, I know what I have seen, I know, in short, all of you.

But if you wish for a display of my prowess. You know I am always aimable to such things.

I shall begin.

I knew, for instance, without you having ever explicitly said, that your dearest wish was for a dog. (Nifflers will have to continue sufficing at present.) I knew that you worried Winston would forget you over our break in the second year, so I kept your picture by his cage and regaled him with tales of your fishing. I knew further, that I should not attempt to gift him to you until you had somewhere stable to keep him, because you would only fret for his safety and would blame yourself for the lack of his comfort. You are always caring for everyone and if your care should fall short before you, it is your fault.

I know that you would refuse me buying you a new sweater, even when the one you have worn, meticulously kept, freshly washed always, wearing with age all the same, is more patch than fabric. But if I quietly wear an extra layer and cast mine away claiming to be overheated, you will not hesitate to steal it if you are cold. You are stubborn in your abilities to care for yourself, but you enjoy taking from me things that are mine, (and though this is not at all about me. I enjoy giving them to you. I would give you far more if you would allow me.)

You believe your gift is a curse, you wish you did not see everything as you did. Though on occasion you wonder if you would be able to see me without it. I think it is beautiful, I think it does not matter, that it is a part of you; not simply an attachment, but an integral piece of who you are, and I love it, and I love you. But truly, I believe you would always see me. (It seems I am incapable of leaving myself out of the equation, or is it only that I arrogantly see myself as so much a part of you that I cannot separate the two in discussion.)

You have your own sets of moods, though they are less overt than mine, but you are always willing to put yours aside if mine are louder. I attempt not to coordinate them as such, but on occasion it slips. I am grateful for you, for the selflessness I do not think I could ever be capable of. Though I try for you, I try very hard.

I know you craft sandwiches of marshmallow fluff and peanut butter when you believe me not to be present. I will remind you, in case you foolishly forget or do not put the correct stock in it, to save you from any future unpleasantness, that my nose is capable of scenting things that have not been physically present for hours. I can smell it on your clothing, taste it on your tongue. It is wholly disgusting, Will. If I ever find where you are hiding those infernal substances, they will vanish quicker than leprechaun gold.

Finally, I know, even still, when I say your name, you smile. A reflex left from days when such a sound was a rarity instead of a common occurrence, but even so, the function remains

the same. I abuse it.

I know that you love me. Often, I do not know why. But you persist.

There are now thirty four minutes, twenty six seconds, and one moment less, until I see you.

Hannibal

Chapter 12

Will

I'm nervous.

Alright, maybe not so much nervous as excited. Except that's not right either. I think I might throw up, but it's a giddy kind of excitement, the anticipation of being content again. What's the word for that?

If Hannibal were here, I'd ask him. And he'd probably tell me, much as he always does, that there's not one word, but several used in conjunction could expressed what I'd said more eloquently. And I would scowl, at him and at the English language, for never having enough words.

Although I'm pretty sure I couldn't hold a glare, because that would also mean that Hannibal was on a plane with me.

Sometimes, I'm curious, and I wonder if I reached out, could I feel him? See him, even? I've never used my gift like that, only rarely trying to find someone, and only then when I was younger, and didn't really know what I was doing. I'm tempted to think that if I could do that with anyone, it would be with him. He's already called me from sleep. What are a few thousand miles in the way? I wonder what I'd find.

It's early morning for them. Is he standing in front of a mirror, slowly donning his layers? He gets real pleasure from clothing, I know. Takes care with each button, smiles at the result; once, flickering. I've seen him do it a hundred times, and now I can act on the urge I've always felt, to undo them with less care and more enthusiasm, and see if he looks just as pleased at the disarray I cause.

Chaos, he called me.

Or maybe he's surveying his school trunk, stacking new books in with the old, running his fingers down the spine of a favorite. Pursing his lips as he's forced to choose, for lack of space.

I wish we were getting ready together. He doesn't seem to sleep, an eccentricity I've teased him about, but it means that he would be the one to rise early, slipping out from skin-warmed sheets into the cool pre-dawn air. I am the one who fights with the alarm clock until the last possible moment. So by the time I stumbled out of my room, he'd already be dressed, pressed, and watching me scramble with a smirk while he poured coffee.

But these are just imaginings. Well-educated ones; I've catalogued all his little rituals, I think my picture of him is as accurate as anyone's could be.

Only hours now, though, and I won't need to.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

Hello Journal,

How funny it is to be writing Hello Journal, and not “Dear Will.” My fingers are naturally inclined to shape the words now, but soon there will be no more need for them at all. Soon.

I am not nervous.

Which is not said in the smug air of “I do not get nervous,” though that much, is of course true. No, it is merely that nervous fails so wholly to capture the emotion that swirls within me, that it is rendered all but obsolete. I feel terrible joy on the one hand, a gathering storm of pleasure. That kind electricity that prickles in the air before the rain breaks from darkening skies. It is an ephemeral sensation, this one. Fleeting in that by definition it cannot last. Anticipation is driven by the approach of a moment, it cannot linger forever or it will die, if the moment does not come, and will, on the other hand, fade at once when it does. Though I have no wish to experience prolonged absence again, I treasure the taste of this on my lips. Precisely because I hope never to experience it again in such intensity, that I allow it to consume so freely now. It is savage, raging through me, roaring, snarling, ready. All I can do to continue to write and not pace aimless until he is here and I am altered.

I miss him so acutely. More intensely now that I know he is close at hand; it throbs through my skull, eats away at my insides, burns and fevers, sings with its own perfect horror. I miss him, he is so close, I miss him.

And this time, when he is here, he will be mine. The anxiety still there somewhere below the tumult, that there will be a repetition of last year’s reunion. And I fancied myself excited then, foolish I was. It is nothing to how I feel now. Laughing one moment, scowling the next, and needing him, needing him so much more all the while. I wrenched myself through this summer, enjoyed what I could in the music and the food, My Aunt’s company, the soothing scents of our gardens. So much beauty around me: art, culture, all the things that were once the only things, but now sing only hollow.

I do not think I could live out the days empty as that. A fearful emptiness. I am so unbearably grateful for this returning surge of passion into my mind, just knowing he is near. It paints everything richer, gives layers once more to everything I pass, brings the music back to my ears. I had worried it would never return on some days. That I would be muted forever. But even simple distant proximity is enough. The knowledge we are occupying the same space, the same moment, *almost*.

The train appears of deeper scarlet, the chatter of all the students abuzz with life.

And somewhere in the throng...I fancy I can scent him from even here where I sit. A rend of my nerves that is new.

It will not be like last year. It is this year. He is mine. We are each other's.

I miss him, but the wait is almost over.

I will put you aside now journal, because footsteps are shuffling closer. And though there is much noise, I think, perhaps. I think it just might...

I do not want you to get thoughtlessly cast aside. I am sure I will have very little control over my reactions. And for once, I do not even mind. My pen is tripping over itself to write this fast enough. So funny that I do not mind.

But that is a ponderous thought for later. The compartment door is opening.

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

And that's it for today's update! I hope it was worth the wait, leave a comment or drop by the tumblr to let us know what you think. I'd wager we're as pleased as the boys to be back (Well, okay, maybe not quite). Next update on Tuesday!

Chapter 14

Will

Things are quiet now, finally. The thrum and buzz of the first day back has faded, all but a diligent few have dropped off to sleep, exhausted by travel. I am that—exhausted—but instead of sleeping, I'm in the Ravenclaw common room, feet tucked under Hannibal where he sits reading a Transfiguration textbook. Who *does* that?

That's a stupid question, of course he does, he always has, and my grades are lucky for it, I guess. Without Hannibal, I'd be a shame to my house.

As if sensing my curious look, his eyes flicker to me for a moment, then again when my gaze remains fixed on him. I can feel a smile tugging my lips, my eyes greedy for him after so long of only imagining. I'm sure I look a little ridiculous, hence the amused glances my way.

"What is it?" he asks finally, book falling to his lap. *Good*, I think, I want his eyes to travel over me that way; devouring. I hope I at least make a more interesting subject than the principles of conservation.

His hand finds my knee, fingers wrapping familiarly, possessively, and, *oh*, to feel him against me, it— well. And I am his afterall. Then his palm slides, flattens, skims up my thigh to rest at my hip, and though every inch he touches sears with the contact, and I'm impatient for more, I bite my lip, shake my head faintly.

His eyes find what mine have already been watching; the last stragglers invading our space at this hour. Only in Ravenclaw will you find people already reading, scribbling furiously, burning midnight oil when we haven't even had class yet.

He sighs, so subtly that someone less versed in Hannibal's expressions might not notice it, and the book goes back in hand.

The other stays, flung casually at its place at my waist.

We will win this unspoken competition, as we have many times before. The witch mouthing the words as she reads in the armchair behind us will tire, and leave. The other couple, splayed across a loveseat with much less decorum than us, will eventually give up sending glares our direction, and say a weary goodnight, and we will gain a few hours of hard-won solitude. All thanks to Hannibal's supernatural ability to function without sleep and my willingness to drink unhealthy amounts of coffee.

But his fingers curl and uncurl restlessly, rucking up my shirt to—

to feel beneath, sorry, it's very… distracting, him tracing the lines of my ribs, the jut of my hip, I almost gasped out loud. He's toying with me, laying touch so light it's half imagination, while he continues pretending to read, not acknowledging me past the pleased smile that has

nothing to do with Transfiguration and everything to do with the tremble in the hand I try to write with as his fingers ghost their way across my stomach.

Yes, Mr. Lecter—I glare—I am aware of what you're doing. Is it just me, or did his smile widen incrementally? Bastard.

I missed him.

Cruel though, to do this, when there could be hours still until we're really alone, until I'm free to push the book from his hands and tug him over me, his weight pinning, cash in on the promises he's written tonight, preferably with his mouth across my skin—

Okay, really. Enough of that. I'm starting to feel feverish, and although he's very determinedly pretending to read, Hannibal's lips have pulled into an outright smirk.

Emerick Switch must be terribly witty.

Today. I will write about the day, in detail, in all its mundanities, and ignore all thoughts of him gasping under my hands—*fuck*.

The train. Okay, good start. I boarded, being bumped and shoved by the other bodies milling around, feeling numb. If he wasn't there already, if I had to wait in the compartment for him, my nerves were just going to fizzle out. Already, anticipation prickled through me, a feeling somewhere between the pins and needles of a limb falling asleep and the rush of uncontrolled, unbidden magic that had, on occasion, caused me to burn out light bulbs as a kid.

And beneath that, a terrible longing. Somehow, the closer we got, the more unbearable the distance was. I tried to rush as much as I could, pushing past people as I pushed aside their errant anxiety, excitement, and joy, peering into each compartment for him. A girl, vaguely familiar, though I couldn't say why beyond that she was a Ravenclaw, apologized as her bag smacked against my ribs. I barely felt it, muttered an acknowledgement, and continued scanning the compartments, only distantly aware of her curious eyes following me.

And then.

Through the glass, I saw him, and everything stilled. The light from the window caught him, haloed his hair and made his eyes sharp and strange. He was writing in a little book in his lap, one as familiar to me as the one I hold right now, but as I reached for the door, he cocked his head, lips parted, and set it down on the seat beside him.

Three months of letters instead of his voice, and now there was only a door between us. I could have turned it to toothpicks.

He stood when I entered, his fingers flexing at his sides the only visible hint at the pull between us, the one that had twined painfully around me when we were apart, and now begged no more distance.

“Will,” he said, only it wasn’t just a word, it was a breath of relief, an easing of lungs bound tightly for too long, everything I was already feeling. If there was more, he didn’t get it out, because I tossed my duffel bag aside, and flung myself at him.

My arms over his shoulders, our bodies collided, and we very nearly toppled over onto the seat behind him. I was laughing, I think, breathless, reveling in the reality of him in my arms, the unbearable solidity of his shoulder against my cheek. When he regained his balance, his hand found the back of my head, smoothed across curls I had let go a little too long. We kissed, clinging like that, and I pressed every conviction and confession of summer into it, knowing he understood, feeling it returned with a force that left me lightheaded.

Yes, Mr. Lecter, I’m writing about you. He’s looking over curiously. I wonder if he can read it on my face, or if it’s just assumed that he is my favorite subject.

Oh, but the couple has gone. Likely not to bed, since they left together, but to some other, less crowded corner of the castle. I wish them the best of luck. Now there is only our rival, Miss Diligence beneath the bookcase. As I watch, her eyes are drooping, her head lolling on the hand that holds it up, and she yawns.

I nudge Hannibal’s side with my feet and grin. She won’t last long.

We unfortunately didn’t get much time alone on the train earlier, in fact even as we kissed, a chorus of whistles and yells met us. I would have continued, totally uncaring in that moment, but when Bev and Jimmy stepped into the compartment, yelling obscenities over their piles of luggage, Hannibal laughed quietly and pulled back.

We wouldn’t want to be rude.

Still, I took his hand as we sat, and I refused to relinquish it. I scooted closer, so that our thighs were pressed, as the others trickled in, and I listened as they all shared their news; Bev was petitioning for animagus status, Jimmy had made prefect, Alana spent a week in Madrid. Hannibal’s eyes were on me, darkly, the whole time.

I didn’t share my own news. The letter I got from Professor Crawford a week ago remained tucked into my Defense Against the Dark Arts book, where I couldn’t see it and therefore did not have to think about it. I haven’t even told Hannibal, though he guessed before I even did that this year Crawford would want to take my occlumency lessons in another direction. The things he describes, of trying to inhabit another’s thoughts, it sounds terrible. What if I can’t find my way back? It’s taken everything I have to get to this point, where I can close myself off from the influence of others, and now he wants me to *invite them in*?

I’m not keen on the idea, despite his attempts to make it appealing. He threw around “ministry career” and “letter of recommendation.” Implied that he can help me become great, but I have no desire to be great, honestly. I don’t know what I want to do, haven’t even begun to think about it, even though we have OWLs this year, and I should, but I have very simple needs. One of them is the ability to find solitude, which such a lifestyle would be decidedly lacking.

And I haven't told Hannibal, because I know how he feels. He's fascinated by my ability to assume the point of view of others, and he would tell me that honing it is the least I should do with it. I understand the flicker of curiosity when he knows I'm using it, even inadvertently. I mean, yes, it is fascinating. It is useful. Maybe I could do a lot of good with it.

But just like Crawford, he's outside of it. He only sees the results, he doesn't have to struggle through the consequences. He will never have to fight with it like I do, because even if he trains and masters legilimency (which I believe is completely within his abilities) it is not the same thing as what happens to me when another presence swallows me up. It's invasive, and ugly, and I'm terrified of losing myself in a way that someone… normal would never have to feel.

So the letter remains, in my awareness, but only on the fringes for now. And—

Oh, but the witch at the bookcase has finally gathered her things. Hannibal is shifting impatiently, coiled, waiting for her to disappear into the girl's dormitory. I give him a look that suggests he has only seconds until he will make up for three months of lost time and several hours of torment on this couch, and he meets it with a slight narrowing of eyes. The way his look pins me draws cold fingers up my spine, and I reconsider; I am not the one who will be issuing commands tonight.

I'm very sorry, but I will have to set this aside for another day.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal | *Interlude*

Did you miss me?

A murmur between kisses, our bodies wrapped together, the couch falling away, the dormitory falling away, everything disintegrating into dust but us, it does not seem night nor day, suspension of the deepest kind.

He is spread out beneath me, beautifully, open to my slow advances. I am a predator, but he is not prey, though I might in this moment devour him. My weight presses him down, and he tangles his fingers through my hair, but he has me so much more than I have him. Or perhaps just the same. Though he reads the need for control that aches through me, to press him down and open his lips, act, act, act, as I have been so incapable of doing. Reclaim myself from the helplessness separation, emotion, longing, wrought. On another evening we might wrestle for this, for the opportunity to pin and hold, but he yields without needing to be asked. Allows my tongue to run across his lips and part them, allows my teeth to graze his neck and draw gasps loud into the air. My hands are on his wrists, my body is pushed against him and it is all so loud in my brain. A raucous cacophony, but finally, thankfully, like a great breath drawn at the brink of suffocation, I am the conductor.

A great grind as the chain gives way and I grab hold of them once more. He is with me now, another kiss, another stutter of an exhale, he is with me and though I cannot predict him, and I cannot predict where these emotions will twist and turn, my mind is my own again, not laden with the press of separation.

Clarity. I taste clarity for the first time in months, and he my madness and my salve all in one.

Maybe. He laughs, lips reddening already. Maybe I missed you. I really can't seem to reme—

I swallow the words away, kiss deeper and he kisses back, craning his neck off the couch to meet my mouth. It is as though we've never kissed before, hungry and grasping, all adrenaline and chemical reaction. In the fray his leg has wrapped around my mine, and I press closer, skin beneath my fingers, I realize his shirt rucked up between us. My own undone. I can't recall the motions, but the results speak for themselves. There's a sweetness to reunion, as sweet as it had been the moment we saw each other, his laughter, his body in my arms, but there's something sharpened there now, something coiling and burning, slithering around us both and pulling us together. All of those searing dreams could not have imagined this, between us.

I want, and I scarcely know for what.

A kiss, I pull away, light on his lips, and back, and again, until he's mouthing up to try and catch me, but every time I draw out of reach at the last moment, dancing in again to steal only the barest of brushes until he growls and I cannot resist any longer and again. We clash.

Never has lost breath felt so much like life. Drowning in the most exquisite of fashions.

You're thinking.

He accuses, a tug on my hair. I nip at his mouth in retaliation and he tugs harder, as though he is tugging on every cell of my body, as though he is a current and I am metal, through all of me, the pulse of life.

Stop thinking.

His mouth is so close the words sink into my skin, more I am hungry for them, the absorption of his exact wavelength into me, his voice, that I have ached for.

Stop thinking and kiss me.

And who am I to deny such a request, a request tangled in a command that I choose to wish to follow and there is no one in the world for whom I would stop.

No one but him.

I love him.

So much, so much, I love him.

All my weight drapes heavy as he settles back satisfied, lets me lay across him, surround him and my mouth is there.

And I kiss him.

Oh, I kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who left us such wonderful feedback on the first update! And I hope today's makes up for us keeping them apart like that ;) Next update on Saturday!

Chapter 16

Will

My limbs are filled with lead, my thoughts sluggish. I haven't even been to see Hannibal yet, not since we said goodbye in class, and I don't think that I can work around the furious pounding in my head long enough to try. Much as I wish…

He'll understand.

It has *never* been like this before. I've never felt someone else prodding around the edges of my mind, and I'm disgusted at the thought that maybe this is what it's like for others when I accidentally reach for them. It's a violation. A breaching of boundaries I didn't even know that I had, and right now they're so torn and ragged that I'm terrified to be around anyone, afraid that in this strange half-being, anyone's presence might swallow me entirely. I don't know what would happen.

I can't even go back to the dorm and try to sleep; in the time I spent tossing and turning up there, I learned far more about my roommates' nocturnal habits than I ever wanted.

So I'll stay here, on the couch in front of the fireplace. It's cold, it's late, but it's quiet, and if the shaking in my hands has yet to go away it's… it's probably because of the chill of the air.

Crawford told me the first day of class that he wanted to set up a time for our new lessons. I had shuffled awkwardly, feeling the others' gazes on me as the class emptied; some curious, others jealous, most just uncaring. I felt Hannibal's eyes longest, knew that he was smiling—he enjoys the special attention I get—and tried to focus on what Crawford was saying rather than letting my thoughts wander, as they were tempted, to freedom, an afternoon alone with friends. If he would ever let me go.

"It's because the OWLs are this year," Hannibal murmured later, running fingertips over my chest, the thin cotton of my shirt. My heart stuttered, body arching to follow the touch. "He wants you to impress them, so you may have a chance as an auror."

My eyes closed against the gold, early autumn light, and everything disappeared into red behind my lids. Hannibal's hand traced along my neck, and I shivered, tried to stay still despite the overwhelming urge to crane up and kiss him, pull him beneath me into the crunch of leaves and grass. It's a game he enjoys; testing me this way. Seeing how long it takes to pull a reaction from me. The brush of fingers ran along my jaw.

"Mmh—what if I don't want to be an auror?"

I opened one eye, curious, to peer at him. I wanted to gauge his reaction, but he appeared stoic, focused only on the lines he drew as his hand found my chest again, dipped to pull the top button undone. His lips quirked at the sharp rise of my chest—a held breath—when his skin found mine.

“You are his protégé. I doubt he has given much thought to what *you* want. You are useful, and so he wishes to use you.”

My eyes had fallen closed again, my head back. His fingers traveled back up, caught another button, found my throat. My breath caught beneath his touch.

“As many will, when they discover your talent.”

He brushed across my chin now, and as the pads of his fingers found my lips, I smiled beneath them. His tone was calm, even, bordering casual, but I recognized the dark, low sound to his voice.

“Which one?” I teased beneath his fingertips, voice full of implication, of things still unexplored.

I looked at him as his hand stilled, laughter on my tongue. He was doing his best to appear unamused—he can’t stand crudeness, usually—but couldn’t seem to drag his touch from my mouth. I parted my lips, felt the tips of his fingers press in, a swipe of my tongue, and enjoyed the subtle shift of emotions cross his face.

This was the first memory Crawford invaded. We started our lesson in his office; spartan, neat. Only his commendations adorned his walls, and maps, only files on his desk. No pictures. As I tore myself free of the memory, shaken, I looked at these things, grabbed on, made them real. Behind his desk, Crawford was unimpressed.

“I’m glad to see you’re taking these lessons seriously, Will,” he said, cold and stern. My face warmed, realizing he’d seen the whole exchange with me.

“I wasn’t—you weren’t supposed to—” I defended, angry that he’d seen, and more angry that he was causing guilt to pool sickly in my belly, as though I’d done something wrong.

“Then protect it,” he ordered, voice rising, “use what I’ve taught you and *fight back*.”

I drew in a shaky breath, gripped the armrests until my fingers ached. I could easily tell what he was thinking, feeling at this moment. A lowering of my walls, and I could let him in without him ever knowing, like a radio picking up a signal. But what he asked now was different—reach into his mind in search of something specific. I’d spent so long keeping other voices out, I’d never thought to invade. Another slow breath, and I nodded.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

This time, when I felt the tingle, the pressure on my thoughts, I squeezed my eyes closed, imagined the river. Wide, smooth waters, the rush of the current, the leaves above, gilded with sunlight.

And then I was flying with Molly, the sun glinting off her hair, her cheeks red from the wind. She grinned over her shoulder at me in challenge.

“Will,” Crawford said, but that wasn’t right, he wasn’t here. How could he be? I followed her as she veered sharply around one of the goalposts, laughing, and it was so nice to see her

again, like this, to feel her smile warm as sunlight on me. But that didn't make any sense either; wasn't it only yesterday we'd gone to Hogsmeade with her friends, tangled our feet under the table?

"Will, *concentrate*," Crawford ordered, and the broom fell out from beneath me, I plummeted as the memory crumbled to nothing, and I jerked back once more to the present. To the office, and the uncomfortable chair beneath me, and Crawford, who watched me impassively over clasped hands.

My tongue felt thick against the roof of my mouth, and my stomach roiled. I was definitely going to be sick.

Crawford sighed, and ragged as I was, his disappointment filled me, his weariness that matched my own.

"That's enough for tonight," he said, pressing his hands flat against the desk to hoist himself out of his seat. A weak nod, and I let him see me out.

Strategic, to have our lessons so late, so they don't interfere with my classes. I'm grateful for that, at least, though I still can't sleep, and the fire has long gone out, leaving me shivering and writing by wandlight.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

Hello journal,

You'll forgive me if I don't write long, it is late, exhaustively late, late enough that even I am tired. Or perhaps early would be a more apt term for it. Even with every nocturnal proclivity I possess the hour creeps through my body. Perhaps the effort of the night has left me drained, perhaps it is not even my exhaustion I am feeling at all, but whatever the true source, it settles deep in my bones, throbs loud when I consider the day to come. I know that in moments, I will have to rise, the fire little but low crackling embers, lift myself, lift Will and settle him into his bed before I grapple blindly for my own. But for just a breath longer, I will allow myself this stillness.

I suppose I should perhaps start from the beginning.

He did not come to me after his lesson.

Of course, I was surprised, since it is our usual way, to find each other in the quiet hours of the day and settle, to touch, or talk, or simply work quietly, content at the other's presence. It is not required that this occur, by any means, but I have...somewhat grown to expect it. Though we have not explicitly discussed the arrangement... unless it is to tell the other that for some reason or another, it is not a possibility. But no such exchange was had.

Dinner passed.

Silence

And then another hour.

Silence.

I finished my work, tidied my room, opened up the new book on Potions that I had received over the holidays, but had been much too distracted to properly enjoy. (It would seem the fate of this book.) But I do not think I have to say I was waiting for him to appear, the clock ticking slowly on the wall, the pointed lack of clumsy wings announcing a letter, the sharp absence of his scent, of his laugh. Phantoms of it in my ear as I looked up every time the passage opened and students drifted in and out. But no Will.

Silence.

Another hour and it was late.

Late enough to consider sleep. I could see him tomorrow, I tried to reason, more than once began my own letter to send to his bed,

Perhaps you have fallen asleep, Perhaps you are distracted by work, Perhaps you had intended to inform me, however…

You do not have to scoff, journal. I was aware I was being ridiculous, as such. And so I only tore them into strips and set them to ash with my wand. But Will is prone to missing breakfast, and our schedules have little overlap today, and so if I did not see him soon, then it would be…

Too long.

Too long for me, when I had thought that I would already have done so hours ago.

Too long, too long.

Silence.

Another hour.

"Will?"

He sat as though in a doze, before the fire. At first glance I thought him to be asleep, but as I neared, a lurch of curious worry threading through me, I found his eyes to be open, too big, hollowed out, into the flames. He stiffened as I approached, clearly cognizant, but not welcoming. I paused in my steps. Still in the dancing shadows, my breath suddenly fled.

"Please don't." He was shaking, journal, shivers that danced down his whole body, fingers up to his hair, twisting in them as the moments spun into each other, clenching deeper. "Don't. I can't right now. I can't—" Panicked words as though he was desperately trying to cling to something, to himself. A barren whisper. "You're too much to keep out." Another inhale. "You have to go, Hannibal, please. I can't."

I think it is a testament, journal, to my general improvement as creature who handles things such as emotions and hearts, that I did not automatically leap to only the worst of conclusions. That I took in the pang of sudden rejection that swam towards me, wrapped my fingers around it and held it at bay before it could turn me to ice. Clarity, necessary. More of it. Words, speak— the blessing of voice.

"...Too much?"

His fingers yanking on his hair as though he would rip it out, I wanted to tell him if he thought for even a moment I would leave him like this, than he was entirely mistaken, that I had not a care for what he thought, I wouldn't go. That even now it was taking more than a little impulse control that I barely possess not to fly across the room and wrench his destructive hands away from himself. But I only stayed silent, stayed in place.

The thought garnered something of half yelp, half sob, a strangled terrible sound that truly I do not wish to ever experience again.

“I can’t—” gritted, bowed lower, “can’t keep you out right now.” Terrified. I know terrified, and he was terrified. “I won’t be able to find where you start and I end.” Again. “You’re too much, too loud, it’s all—” Aching. “I want you—” Terrible, blurted, I wish I were less pleased to hear it, but I was, despite everything. “I want you so much, god. Hannibal. But I don’t think I could find my way out.”

All his careful control in shambles. A different me might have tilted my head in some kind of ravenous hunger, tasted the twining that would result from pushing him like this, the still tempting murmur of connection that his raw brain would create. Would have reached with every last strength to push him over the brink.

But instead, with a breath, a low hum of air, I knitted myself shut. Out of practice, admittedly, more effort than I care to admit involved in the process, the slow tucking away of anything and everything. Had it once really been so simple? I suppose it had been then to prevent the pain the feelings held, to protect the weaknesses of my heart from his instant knowledge. But now that it is so deeply felt and shared…

No matter.

The locks only needed some reinforcement, another layer of steel, another door, one by one, until every last one of the walls were up - every last protection to lock me away. A wonder at trapping my mind in a cage again. The strangest sensation of numbness. Did I really think I could exist in such a way, once? Already everything was attempting to burst out, raging against being so repressed. But I ignored it.

To his own mind, the change was palpable. A gasp as though he was pulled from drowning, a strangled sound. Grateful, mingled with fearful, low shadows of disapproval, unhappiness, guilt.

“Temporary.” I promised, already on my knees behind him, my arms around his stomach, a grimace as the imprisoned emotions lurched, pressing them deeper back lest my mind reach out and betray.

Feather light touches around my wrists, up my arms, my eyes closing as I settled myself against him allowed him to lean back into me. A strange removed closeness, and so much more effort to keep myself away than I had envisioned. But more important to give him this, than to expend some energy. The shaking dying with the warmth of my body, relief dragged from it, sagging into him.

“I don’t like not feeling you.” More pause than voice. Tremulous. Anguished.

That would make for two of us. But I am thankful I am capable, if it means being allowed to be near.

Nothing, and then a breath. Fear again.

“Do you feel me—I mean, usually. When I...” His voice died away, something in it as though he thought himself to be a horror, as though he was certain in this moment that he hurt me

with his gift. When nothing could be farther from the truth. But it was not the time to begin to explain to him how his presence filled me when he reached out, how perfectly.

“Never unpleasantly.”

That seemed to be enough for the moment and nothing more was exchanged. Only touch, the solidity of my mindless body pressed against him as an anchor, the lightness of his presses until weariness overtook his limbs and they slowly settled heavy along mine, sleep rushing through.

I dared not close my eyes for fear that if I did the barriers would fall, and I would thus break my silent promise to keep myself away, give in to the pull and make true his nightmare. So instead I held vigil as he drifted off into the sleep of the drained. Watched over him from my disjointed mount.

But it is near morning now, and I do not believe I can uphold this for much longer. I will lay him carefully in his bed and leave, though I do not wish it at all, hope that the night has repaired his own walls as I release mine.

Goodnight, Journal.

I will see you, I am sure, in the clutches of this soon to be very long day.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies; I misled you all in saying that we would only be posting on Tuesday and Saturday. After several confused messages from my co-writer, I was reminded that we are, in fact, posting on Tuesday, *Thursday,* and Saturday.

Chapter 18

Will

It was afternoon before I woke today, the light casting unusual angles through the curtains and over Bev's curious face. She prodded me again from her cross-legged perch at the foot of my bed.

"Graham."

She had a mug tucked between her hands, aromatic, steam uncoiling from it and I squinted at her, disoriented.

"You look like shit," she said, offering the cup. I blinked at her a moment before taking it. My head was aching, my tongue thick in my mouth and hair standing every direction on my scalp. My last memory was of the calm of night, and of—oh, god, Hannibal—the blankness as his arms settled around me. I groaned as it all came back; his worry almost palpable as he topped the stairs, mingling with my own and setting my heart to an alarming pace, his pain, confusion when I'd begged him to leave. And then, nothing. Total radio silence, soothing at first, but then terrible, as the cold lack of his presence sank in, too much like a time I'd like to forget, when we'd been together but so, so much alone.

"I *feel* like shit," I answered, scrubbing at puffy eyes with the heel of my hand. I took a slow, tentative sip of coffee, remembering the rebelling of my stomach last night, but it was fine. More than fine, it was hot and bitter and perfect.

"Am I in trouble for missing class?" I asked, getting my arm under me to shift up, lean back against the headboard. I found, feeling hollow, that I didn't much care if I was. I was more concerned with how I'd gotten to bed, and when; Hannibal must have put me there.

"Fuck no," Bev snorted, "I don't know what you did to Crawford, but he talked to all your professors. You could probably skip the rest of the day too, but he sent me to check on you."

That was a surprise. I'd wondered how he would be when I faced him again, if he considered me a failure completely, or if he'd just act as though our lesson had gone as planned. It hadn't occurred to me that he might be genuinely concerned.

"Your other half wasn't looking so hot this morning either," she went on. Then, hesitantly, added, "Should I bother asking?"

I clambered out from the tangle of covers at the mention of Hannibal, tore off my shirt and dug through the dresser for a clean one, mind torn between cold guilt and the debate of how much to tell Bev.

"We both had a long night," I said, muffled by the sweater I was pulling over my head. It wasn't his—he had that, for the time being. Bev wrinkled her nose.

“Gross, Will.”

“No, not—” I scrambled, tugging the wool down, trying to smooth out wrinkles that would have none of it, “I mean it wasn’t, we haven’t really—”

Her smirk grew, and my face felt hot. Now was really not the time to go over Hannibal and my physical relationship with her, though it was a relief to feel something other than numbness, even if it was discomfort. Maybe that was her intention.

“I wasn’t… it turns out I’m not very good at legilimency,” I sighed, stepping haphazardly out of yesterday’s pants, nearly toppling over in my rush, “It was pretty awful actually.”

She nodded, circled her arms over her legs,

“I kind of gathered as much, from what Crawford said. Though it wasn’t much.”

I laughed sourly.

“Well, neither was the lesson, to tell you the truth. Just a lot of slamming my head against a wall,” I started to shuffle out of my boxers, “Uh, metaphorically speaking. Do you mind?”

She rolled her eyes, muttered, “Don’t flatter yourself,” but she covered her eyes.

“Hannibal must have stayed up with me when I finally fell asleep,” I reasoned, and peered over my shoulder at her to make sure she wasn’t looking, “He was in class this morning?”

“Charms, at least.”

I turned back to her, pulled her hands from her eyes.

“How’s this? Okay?”

She smiled thinly, unfolded her legs to stand in front of me. It seemed like she was done growing; she only came up to my chin now, when once we’d been eye-to-eye. Her fingers combed gently through my hair as she tried to tame it into complacency.

“Well, you still look like shit, but I really don’t think it’s going to matter to him.”

Something simmered just beneath the surface of her words—jealousy, almost, not of me or of Hannibal, but both of us, as a unit. I remembered a conversation by the lake, Hannibal’s gentle teasing and the pink to Alana’s cheeks. I wondered, not for the first time, at the fact that Bev had never expressed an interest in any of our classmates; but I didn’t dare pry, not with my head still aching in raw reminder. Instead, I caught her hand where it rested in my hair, squeezed it.

“I’ve never… has it ever hurt you? What I can do?”

Her eyes narrowed in a soft smile, no trace of shattered glass there. I wonder what I looked like to her then, manic, wide-eyed, desperate. If it was the same as I’d looked to Hannibal last night.

“Nah,” she said, shrugging, “never even notice it. And I’ve got nothing to hide, so I doubt there’s much that’s news to you.”

That isn’t entirely true, and I think even as she said it, something like doubt flickered across her face. I wonder how much she’s hiding from even herself.

Not that I have room to judge. How often had she watched me ache for Hannibal, tried to make me see what was so obvious to her?

I nodded, grateful that Hannibal hadn’t just been trying to protect me when he’d said the same the night before. Bev wouldn’t spare my feelings if I asked for the truth.

Worry dragged me through the corridors, down to the babble of voices that signified lunch. And I found him quickly, a lone flash of green at his neck at a table made for blue. He turned when I came near, and he really did look awful—not unappealing, make no mistake, he’s still strange and beautiful even at his worst, his most weary. But shadows pooled beneath his eyes, barely open, and he swayed a little as he stood.

I stopped just shy of him, surrounded by the rattle of plates and voices, the smells of food that woke a sudden, clawing hunger in my belly.

“Hey,” I said softly.

I can be impossibly articulate at times; I have to be, to keep up with someone like Hannibal, who sees and speaks of the world as though it’s a sprawling baroque painting. But when it comes to expressing what I feel about him, too often my words fall utterly short, rendering me near-mute, and what syllables do clamber their way out of my throat don’t come close to the ones I need—*thank you, I love you, I need you.*

Hannibal smiled, amused by my eloquence, and used to my brand of affection.

“Hey,” he answered, teasing, his eyes crinkling. I wanted to kiss him, to hold him, something, but given our surroundings, I settled for sweeping his hair—soft and lacking its usual product—from his forehead as we took our seats. His eyes closed at the touch, and the familiar thrum of his presence twined around my mind. A sigh, *relief*, to have him near again. The strange distance between us had been at once soothing and terrible, broken as I had been last night, and a heaviness in my chest eased to know it wasn’t permanent, his locking of doors.

We had to part for our next classes, reluctantly, and then found each other again in Crawford’s room. We took a desk in the back, rather than our usual place in the second row, and as Crawford began a lecture on the elements of a Patronus charm, Hannibal’s eyes began to drift closed. I shifted my chair over subtly, seeing sleep fighting to take him, so that when his head at last lolled to the side, it found my shoulder. The quiet flutter of his breath against my neck was soothing, tempting, to give into my weariness as well, and join him, but instead I forced my eyes open and took the notes I knew he’d be upset about missing. Once, I felt Crawford’s attention settle on us, felt his disapproval rise in his throat, but I met his gaze fiercely, *pushed* with the boundaries of my mind, and he went on with his lecture. He didn’t look at us again.

And now, what relief—classes over, homework ignored, for the time being—to sink together, our usual, lazy exploration of the grounds and each other set aside in favor of tangling our limbs at the base of jutting rock on the hill, bags used as pillows, sun warming our skin and the sounds of others heading to dinner far away, unimportant.

“I was worried,” I mumble against his chest. The warm scent of skin and sleep and, faintly, his cologne, drags me quickly into rest, I’m not sure how much longer I will fight it. For his part, he is already half-asleep, just barely woke at the end of Defense Against the Dark Arts long enough for us to seek solitude. The slow pound of his heart against my cheek pulls mine to match. When he makes a quiet sound of acknowledgment, it rumbles through his chest, my head.

“That you would lose yourself?” he muses sleepily.

I shake my head, tuck closer with a sigh. I think it is soon time to put this journal down.

“That I wouldn’t find you again.”

But he is here, now, and the flicker of his dreams mingles with my own sinking consciousness.

Chapter 19

Hannibal | *Interlude*

The earth beneath my cheeks is cool. It is foolish, I think to say, but my tongue is so heavy, laden with efforts that have all but seeped strength away. So instead, I say it now, to you, as though I were there. I do not like to lose a moment my mouth wished to create, I do not like to lose moments at all. And this one sits on the brink of a dream, so poorly collected by the weakly pulsing cells of my mind.

It is foolish, I think to say. The ground is hard, the sun is setting already, though we have hours still, but its rays will sink out of sight and our eyes will likely still be closed and then we will shiver, our sweaters too thin, the greenery damp around us. I do not want you to be ill, I think to say, but my tongue is heavy and my eyes are closed already. My lashes have fallen across my cheeks and with the last of my strength, like a blind man, I grapple for him, twine our feet together, our arms, everything.

I do not need to kiss him as some couples do, to taste closeness. Mere proximity is enough, the comforting curl of our minds twining beyond any manner of touch, better than touch, it is the mind after all the creates all sensation, and ours meet at the source, raw and pure, contained chaos. It is a mental twining of hands. Though touch is a beast not silent, and howls for more, somewhere distant. He is heavy against me, his breath tickling my cells, mingling with the grass and the wind, but sweeter, I could separate him distinctly from every one of those sensations if I tried, because he sits where they live, supersedes them, even now, wrung and wrenched like this.

It was the most difficult thing in the world,

I think to say,

I do say,

but not aloud.

Speech, much like talk, is redundancy, we could communicate with looks alone if we opened ourselves to it, with not even that, with the call of our thoughts, one signal leaping a divide, tying us together.

To unwind you from every last part of me.

and quieter. You'll always find me.

I drift away on peace that is not mine, dream of oceans that I have never seen and waves that spill salt and sand on my lips. He is there, he is with me. At the beach, in my mind.

We are not alone.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal | The Bees and… the Bees

I had the strangest manner of conversation this afternoon, journal. Though, as ever with oddities, it was rather informative.

“Uh...hello?”

Jimmy ogles at me in his usual wide-eyed sort of peer, head tilted already to the side, trying to ascertain what it is exactly I am looking for, in my rather unscheduled appearance to his makeshift apiary. His stance is defensive, not strictly school regulation to have turned an empty greenhouse into a breeding ground for bees, but not yet combative. As a friend, of sorts, I am being given the benefit of the doubt. But he will protect the bees, his almost glare tells me; there will be trouble if I try to go in for the bees.

He chooses not to question how and why I know that he possesses this place, even though I am certain neither Will nor Bev are aware. Perhaps not even Brian. But I have a bad habit of knowing, perhaps nefarious once, now simply...an uncontrollable urge. Jimmy seems to recognize this in me better than most, keenly aware though his jokes tend to distract from the fact, and he simply allows that this is but one more in many quirks, and accepts it.

In any case, I have not come to harm the bees.

“They really are fascinating,” He shrugs his shoulders and turns away from me, pleased almost, to have someone here to lecture with the topic so open at hand. “Their brains can stop aging, you know, reverse back to a younger state depending on their environment.” One flies around him, settles on his forehead and he scarcely seems to notice, a pruning shear back as he turns to a set of bright blooms and plucks at them. “And their ejaculation, well,” He laughs to himself, a giddy sort of amusement, lost in his own pleasure even as he turns to me to check if his amusement is contagious.

It is funny, in an ironic sort of way.

“That is topical,” I tell him without hesitation, because I see no reason to avoid the reason for my visit much longer. And with such a *fine* entry point. Perhaps I smirked. Perhaps I smirk in memory.

Whatever he thought I might say though, that was not it. Sharp blades flinging carelessly through the air, as he turns with a frown

“Topical? You want bee ejaculate? That’s weird, Hannibal, even for you—is it for some strange potion? I won’t do it if it hurts the bees.”

“Will.” I say instead, perhaps purposefully obtuse, but his reactions are entertaining.

“*Will* wants bee ejaculate?” There’s a sudden high pitch to his voice and his cheeks are reddening. The bees buzz with alarm and I shake my head as I move to sit on the wooden stool across from him.

“No.” And though a rather improper construction crosses my mind, I choose to ignore. “No, Will and I, well I mean, I am considering ...” The words loop strangely across my tongue, and now I am the one who is a bit pinked, “intimacy. So it is topical.” I clear my throat. “That.”

He’s staring again, and then with a bark of a laugh crosses his arms, shaking his head and muttering *Will wants bee ejaculate* under his tongue. A trace of a smile on his lips, and I allow my own amusement.

“You want me to teach you?” The response comes finally, gruff, but curious again.

“Precisely.” Only to make him jump and then roll his eyes with a frown.

“Quit teasing Lecter, you came to bug me.”

A fair point, and I rest my cheek on my elbow, watch his fingers dance along the plant.

“Can’t believe you guys aren’t though,” a catch of a drawl to his speech and then a mimic of my accent. “*Intimacying*.”

“We kiss.” I frown, thoughtful. I’m not sure exactly why I decided this was a solid notion, but only because Bev does not really seem to invite this manner of conversation; whatever her own struggles are more than enough to occupy her I am certain, and Brian seemed, in my imagination, the less helpful of the two. Perhaps I only just want to hear the opinion of someone who is not Will. If it is foolish or in poor taste, or somehow...ruinous, I do not wish to have him as my test subject for the thought.

“And more, on occasion. But... It seems so,” a pull of my shoulder to my cheeks. “...In the moment I think it is what I would want, but from the outside.” My head shakes, a little of my hair falling into my eyes as a bee flies too close and startles me back. Jimmy says nothing, caught in one of his thoughtful looks, and so I try to clarify, a sigh,

“I do not think I would recommend it to myself. There is intimacy already in everything we do. Involving bodies...” I wonder if I should cease speaking, but he is listening so I carry on. “I do not know, it seems messy.” A pause, and the truth. “I have a fondness for order.”

We are silent in the sun as he snips off another few dying flower heads.

“Bees like order, but they fuck.” A thoughtful hum and another withered bloom falls to the ground. “And you’re human, kid. Whatever God Complex is cooking in that brain of yours.”

A wink sent over and I do not take offense. “You can’t really plan so much for stuff like this, you know, you just kind of slip into it. Take it slow. If you want it, you want it, if you don’t, you don’t. Brian and I have gotten by just fine on that policy. And he still makes me ejaculate louder than a bee.”

Retribution for the teasing from earlier, I accept his lewdness in exchange for his words. “The both of you seem to have thing for the dramatic, and I don’t get that so much, but,” He turns to me, swinging the shears around as though they were a pointer, “that usually makes for some kick ass sex, so what do I know. And you give off sexual energy like the rest of us are fifty or something; Brian *hates* it. You’ll be fine.”

Another bee nudges him, leaving a trail of pollen across his cheek, a smudge of earth already there, the green stain of grass. I wonder for a moment what it is to be Jimmy Price and simply slip into things, it is perhaps an impossibility for my mind. But a perspective worth consideration.

He moves towards me, the set of shears offered handle out. For a moment, I think to refuse, already I am sweating, the sun too hot on my back, magnified by the glass, the buzzing loud in my ears, the scent of earth all around.

“It’s just bodies, Hannibal.” He says finally. “I don’t think I’d have to tell you that. They don’t change anything. Not really.”

Which is perhaps entirely the only thing, I’d hoped to hear. I nod, accepting, and he wanders off into a story about one of the Queens, gesturing with his hand at what to cut and where.

A strange pleasure in a strange friend, so I stay.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't help but leave the original .docs title on this chapter, it was too good to pass up.

Chapter 21

Will

I find myself having to steal kisses as of late, in the odd moments that we can salvage. Between class, the suddenly heavy crush of homework the teachers seem to need to impose, in the shadow of our exams this year (Du Maurier in particular seems determined to make sure I have no free time), and my lessons with Crawford (little progress there, except that I don't always throw up at the end now) the most Hannibal and I can usually manage is a few hours spent studying, content with the other's presence, or nodding off over a Potions essay.

So Hogsmeade today was a much-needed refrain from all that. Wandering the cobbled roads, our hands clasped tightly in his coat pocket, window shopping and talking in vague innuendos until the need for solitude drove us to the forest's edge, away from crowds and prying eyes.

And even better respite there, bark rough and fragrant against my back, I keened into the hand he pressed over my mouth while his other slipped under my waistband. He laughed softly, murmured "*shh*," against my neck, dragged teeth there briefly, and all I could do was cling to him, my eyes rolling skyward while his touch sent me out of myself.

When we met the others in the Three Broomsticks, we were both flushed and giddy, a bit undone. Alana took one look at us and rolled her eyes at Bev, who only smirked wickedly over her tankard.

"I'll get us drinks," I told Hannibal, sensing an onslaught of teasing, and whisking away before he could protest. Cruel, maybe, to abandon him to their mercy, but he flushes much less easily and less visibly than I, and I could still feel his mouth hot and desperate at my throat, where marks were surely already blooming over my collar.

"Two butterbeers, please," I asked the bartender meekly, a mousy girl who barely looked old enough to be serving here. She nodded, and held a finger up—*one second*—over the drinks she was already pouring.

A chorus of mingled shouts and laughter rose from the table I'd just vacated. I turned my head, grinning, and caught Hannibal's eye. The dark look he gave me in return—*what have you gotten me into?*—left no doubt at whose expense the laughter was. I shrugged, the stupid, crooked, smile refusing to leave my face.

"Just my luck."

The low, husky voice came from my left. I had barely spared the girl beside me a glance as I approached the bar, too caught up in thoughts of mouths and marks, but looking at her again, I recognized her. The memory of gesticulating hands, and a high, nasal voice whispered through my mind, *Margot*, I heard the blonde boy say. Jewel-dark eyes didn't even look my way, but she went on,

“The bartender is very conveniently busy the second I need to order.”

I smiled vaguely at her, uncertain. We had never met, officially, and the last time I’d seen her, she’d been in the company of several of my least favorite people. Paul Krendler hadn’t given us trouble in some time, not since the firm reprimand he’d been given last year, after he’d shorn Hannibal’s hair in the hallway, but that didn’t mean I was ready to start inviting him and his friends over for dinner.

I looked around the tavern instead; the clusters of students around tables and standing at the walls, laughing under the dim gold light. A familiar blonde ponytail caught my eye, and something twisted sharply in my chest as I watched Molly laugh with her red-headed friend whose name I had never been able to catalogue. As if sensing my eyes on her, she turned.

She looked pretty, as always, and just as distant from me. Her face betrayed nothing, not even recognition as her eyes flickered briefly over me, and I swallowed. Waved weakly, attempted a grin that didn’t quite make it. She watched me for a moment, allowed a small, distracted smile, and turned back to her friend. She didn’t wave. I didn’t expect her to.

“Wow. That was… harsh.”

“Excuse me?”

I turned back to Margot, who was stirring the dregs of her drink with a straw. She raised her brows and nodded in the direction of the table of Gryffindors.

“Ex-girlfriend?”

My breath left me in a disbelieving laugh.

“Uh… yeah,” I said, a feeling of unreality settling over me, “Yeah, I guess so.”

Not that it’s any of your business.

She nodded, sucked loudly on ice.

“You’re Will Graham.”

My brows shot up, and she shrugged, added,

“Margot Verger. I wouldn't say you're *popular* with my circle, but you’re fairly infamous. Paul is so obsessed with you, it makes a girl wonder…”

Her voice lifted, trailed off into suggestion. She said everything slowly, carefully, not one syllable wasted.

“Good to know,” I said, the twist of sarcasm strong. The bartender appeared from a cellar behind the bar, two somewhat dusty bottles in hand, and I shot her a hopeful look, but they went to the couple at the other end, and she disappeared again. I sighed.

"Paul is an idiot," Margot intoned quietly, without venom. It was just a fact. I laughed.

"You talk that way about all your friends?"

She shook her head, met my eyes. She was beautiful, I realized, in the cold, strange way that many Slytherins seemed to be. My eyes flickered back to my own where he sat at the table, involuntarily reminded of him.

"He's my brother's friend, not mine."

I remembered the grating sound of the blonde boy's voice as he led the others through the halls. Margot was fascinating, intelligent, from what I could gather, I wondered why she allowed others to guide her that way. There was something guarded about the proud tilt of her chin, the tuck of her mouth. For a second, I considered easing my walls and letting her in, out of curiosity alone.

"What do they say about Will Graham, in your circle?" I asked instead, taking on the lofty tone of her voice. She laughed, but there was no humor there, and looked down into her drink. A lock of hair fell soft from its careful arrangement.

"You have Paul Krendler's jealousy, which is harmless, because he's a buffoon. All his petty little cruelties stem from the knowledge that he is perfectly ordinary, and you are not. But Mason—"

She stopped, and a strange look crossed her face, as though her mouth was still trying to form the words, but they refused to come out. An almost physical reaction. At last, she went on.

"...you have Mason's curiosity. A much more dangerous brand of attention."

There was something else, something vital she was leaving out, in the pull of her eyes. I reached for her hand.

Another chorus of shouts erupted from my table, and I heard Brian groan, "Enough with the bees!" loud enough to carry even over the roar of chatter. Margot flinched back from my touch. Whatever vulnerability had been there was passed, and as if on cue, two tankards of butterbeer were plunked in front of me. I smiled faintly at Margot.

"I should—"

"Yeah."

I hesitated a moment, unsure what exactly had just transpired, but sensing it had been important. Her shoulders had tensed, her face turned away, and I couldn't shake the cold feeling that I'd been given a warning. I wondered at what cost to her.

"Thanks," I nodded. Not enough, not by a long shot, but it had once been enough to tell a silent, angry boy that I understood, even just a little. I hoped she would hear the same in the syllable.

She dipped her head slightly.

"Nice to meet you, Will."

I took the drinks back to our table, settled under Hannibal's outstretched arm, against the warmth of his body, and felt the smile against my neck as he growled, for only me to hear,

"You left me in the lion's den."

I sighed, melting already under his touch, all thoughts of warnings and worries fled.

"Mhm," I agreed, turning to lay a kiss on his temple. "What's to be done about that?"

Chapter 22

Hannibal

He wears it all the time.

At first I was a little confused, believing as I had, that he was simply cold, and possessing of no sweater of his own at the moment. He had wanted it over the summer, of course, for comfort, but now we are reunited, and so a sweater seemed… Well, he has me. A sweater ceased to be meaningful in my mind the moment our fingers touched, and became only what it was, a fabric for warmth. It seemed perfectly natural then that he take mine from where it was folded neatly on the couch. After all, we have been sharing much of late; hairbrushes, pillows. Books, breath, space... what is clothing the face of that?

I watched him hesitate as his fingers inched closer and closer to it, but made little of it, stayed steadfastly looking at my page until at last, he snatched it away and shrugged it over his shoulders. Of course, he does not need my permission, I thought, though anyone else would need far more that, for something as small as a sweater. He knows very well that he is welcome to move around me as he pleases.

Truth be told, I did not recognize it for what it was then, a… a sign, of sorts. It warms me now to think of it. Not a simple taking of cloth. A sign he is mine. I, of course, know well he is so, but the sign is not for me. No, journal. It is for everyone else and *that*, I greatly enjoy. Had I considered the merits of such a thing before, I would have left many more, ehm, indications of my own. (I am making up for lost time now, do not worry.)

In any case, he clambered into it, my eyes amused as it fell too-large across his shoulders, draped a little bit more like a blanket than a shirt, the colors of my house on his skin. They suited him, they always do, and I leaned over to kiss him, my fingers eager to press the fabric into him, to dart beneath it and find skin. Draped so, ensconced in my possession, oh yes, the very thought of it rumbles in my throat. I know very well he is mine.

But he did not give it back as he crept towards the Ravenclaw common room in the early hours of the morning, nor a half hour later when we met at breakfast. I have turned him as nocturnal as myself, and in the midst of the still deserted Great Hall, he climbed onto my lap, straddling me down against the bench, my head tilting back, damp strands loose across my face, musing as he kissed me. (I only arrange myself after breakfast, for very specific reasons.) All thoughts of a sweater, or anything else, fled quickly as my hands wrapped around his waist, pulled him closer, let him arch me back, bend over me, a cheat of our heights, to kiss me thoroughly down. The watery light of morning dancing against our bodies as they threw themselves into their last private moments.

And so, I did not recall the sweater, except in a fleet of thought when I saw the lacking height in the neat stack perched in my closet, and I did not in fact see it again until a week passed, and there he was in class, the sweater again across his shoulders, the embroidered *Lecter*

scrawled in neat script across the right side of his chest, marking him. He was grinning, but there was a nervousness to him, an anxious happiness that sometimes strikes Will, when he simply cannot keep still for being pleased with himself. Bev behind him was smirking, and Brian had his eyes narrowed at me, as though I had accidentally done something I should not have.

(Later, laughing, Bev would whisper in my ear that he had been trying to get Jimmy to wear his shirt for a long time, but that Jimmy said that blue was "not his color." A reasonable explanation, I think. Perhaps Brian should attempt yellow instead. It would please Jimmy; yellow like the bees.)

But at the moment, seeing him there, seeing my name on his chest, the uneasy but determined way in which he wore it...not to mention the darkened patches of almost bruises that played around the collar, completing the, in my mind, wholly debauched look, it certainly roared something loud in my ears, turned the tips of them red, sent a smile across my lips which made one of the girls in the second row blush and turn away. Will's neck going dark pink under the collar as well, but *he* did not drop my eyes. *Later*. Half promise, half taunt. Later indeed.

I sat next to him, my own scent clinging to his skin today, found his hand under the table and squeezed. We did not address it, but it was there, between us, a delicious weight.

"Please return Mr. Lecter's sweater back to him."

Professor Du Maurier intoned as she glanced around the classroom, her eyes suddenly boring into us. And then everyone was looking. *Good*, I thought, but Will's neck only reddened. He didn't hide though, as he might have once.

"It's mine." Arms crossed.

"Mr. Graham…" A warning note. "Unless you were re-sorted to Slytherin and very suddenly adopted, I believe—"

He glared at her.

"No," the barest hint of acerbic sarcasm, but his voice suddenly became very light. "We fell asleep together and I was cold in the morning, so—"

"Mr. *Graham*." She cut him off, voice crackling with a sudden frost, and I must confess, journal, I was quite enjoying this exchange in its own right, my eyes flickering between them at each turn. I don't know what brought out this fierceness in Will, this sudden curl of possession, but I do believe I find it… *appealing* is perhaps too weak a word.

And although normally I would not approve of him addressing Professor Du Maurier in such a way (quite rude, in fact. But have I not always made allowances where he is concerned?) I couldn't help a smirk of my own. *Mine*.

There were points lost, and as it turns out, nothing beneath the sweater but more unseemly marks, something strangely resemblant of teeth marks at his hip, very suspicious journal. So

triumphantly, he was allowed to keep it. But god, the thought of it *on his bare skin*, was not helpful at all in remaining focused on Transfiguration.

“You’re mine too.” He whispered in my ear as we settled again.

A sentiment I cannot disagree with.

He keeps the sweater now, wears it more often than not. Every so often it winds up on my bed again, and then I know *I* am to wear it, and when I do, it smells of him, clean soap, poor cologne, and sun, until I bleed myself back into it and he takes it off my hands again. No hesitation, no permission.

He knows it is granted.

I wonder, with the enormity of the time we spend together, how long before it will cease to smell of me or him and simply smell like us.

I think I shall enjoy that day.

H.L.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Warning for gore; this chapter is a *little* bit graphic.

Will

Too close.

That was too fucking close.

I had legilimency with Crawford today. I was tired, had spent the night before studying for a Potions exam I was pretty sure I had failed anyways. Distracted, miserable, both of us, as he battered at me and time and time again I failed to do anything but claw my way out of my own memories—and only just managed that. Pushing him out, but going no farther.

“It’s not working; I can’t,” I panted, between attacks. Crawford looked at me wearily over his desk, swiped a hand over his face. His tone was brittle when he spoke.

“You’re not *trying*, Will. You are more than capable, if you would just—”

A sigh, heavy.

“Again. Get ready.”

I squared my shoulders against the back of the chair, but I had little hope that I would accomplish anything more than revealing more and more broken school regulations that he—so far—had just ignored.

He gave no warning, this time, no whisper of a spell, no wand drawn even, no chance for defense. Just sunk heavy hands into my thoughts, *pulled*, and I was paralyzed.

I was lost.

We flickered through memories like he was flipping pages—one moment, I was in Memaw’s warm kitchen, getting my hand slapped away from the still-cooling potatoes on the stove. Then, watching with jealousy clawing in my gut as a stranger’s hands pressed Hannibal into a corridor, tongued marks across his neck, then gasping on the cold, stone floor beneath Holcomb, writhing in a cocktail of borrowed fear and staring at a pair of scuffed mary janes.

“Stop it,” I begged, not sure who I was talking to, “please stop.” but pressure grew, and I lurched again, this time to a hallway bustling with people headed to their next class. Molly

was at my side, my mouth was moving, and distantly I knew that we were bickering amiably about which Rolling Stones song was the best.

I was also acutely, terribly familiar with this scene. Somewhere ahead, I knew, Hannibal was walking alone, and beyond him, Krendler was waiting with a curse that would send panic shooting sharply through him, and in turn, me. I had seconds before I would be catapulted through Hannibal's choking terror, before I would reveal truths—the screams, and the silence that followed—that were not mine to share, whose consequences went far beyond detention.

Panic crashed through me in waves as the first yells echoed down the hall, and Hannibal's anger and fear began to pull. First the mocking voices of children, and then farther back, twining, three consciousnesses fusing; mine unwilling, Hannibal's unknowing, and Crawford's unwelcome. His chest heaving, we had almost caught up with him now, I had my teeth gritted, trying to keep out the flurry of images and impressions, the shrill screaming of a little girl, and next, even as my feet pounded toward him, I knew what came next.

No.

Somewhere, something snapped.

Years of precious control discarded, and I fought—*pushed*. Pushed the heavy, extra presence from my mind, and didn't stop, couldn't stop, suddenly furious that someone would try to invade, to take. I felt the boundary of Jack Crawford's mind, and I threw myself at it, *shattered* it. Uncaring where it took me.

Our minds still connected, but no longer in the familiar halls of my head, struggled as we plunged, directionless. Impressions of a warm, Mediterranean breeze, of grapes bursting on my tongue, fizzing with ripeness, a beautiful witch meeting my eyes in a crowd. Unfamiliar and familiar at once, I felt an ache at her appearance and just as quickly disappearance. There was work, then, of both the desk and field variety, faces blurring by before I could even make them out, a cottage with lavender in the windows.

And there was constant fear, the omnipresent weight of the changing world, there was pain so acute and desperate that it dragged at the insides of me until I was unsure what I even meant, the sound of a name clunking roughly, brokenly, from a voice that was not my own, *Bella*. I felt myself sinking, losing hold, and made one last, desperate grab for purchase, for anything familiar.

And I found Hannibal.

It was him and wasn't; at first I didn't recognize the shape being pulled from the snow for anything more than a pile of mismatched, too-thin clothes. Several men in dark robes—*aurors*, I realized—gathered around while one lifted the fragile-looking child from where he lay in the woods behind a barn. His head lolled, and for a terrible moment I thought he was dead; he was so pale, the only color the mess of metal and frozen blood at his throat that drew a garish line, and my breath stopped. Because the face was his—though young, thinner than I'd ever seen him—the features so achingly familiar. I wanted to run from it, I wanted to run to him, but I couldn't do anything but stand there and feel my lungs give out while the man holding Hannibal called for help.

And then there was snow. I blinked at the sudden brightness of it after the dark of the woods, the stars casting everything in cold, white light. Brights and shadow.

Crawford stood beside me, though he was younger, handsome, his face lacking the sorrow it always wore now, his hair missing the sprinkling of gray. He wore the robes of an auror, his breath came in even clouds.

“What am I looking at?”

I started, thinking he was talking to me, but then he turned, dark eyes sliding past me as though I wasn’t there. A young, wiry man who’d been hovering behind us handed Crawford a small mountain of papers.

“Death Eaters, sir. Or… what’s left of them.”

While Crawford turned his attention to the files, I looked again at the field before us, the barn nestled in the woods on the other side of the clearing.

My stomach heaved unpleasantly as my brain realized what I was looking at. What could have been patches of dirt, or mud, under the moonlight, glistening blackly, I now recognized for what it was; piles of viscera. The glint of bone—pieces anyway—matched the smooth white where snow was untouched, bodies torn into indiscernible chunks of meat, all of it swirling together in grotesque splatters of dark and light. The entire scene smelled of blood, of death, and of that strange, indescribable scent of magic.

I closed my eyes against the sight, took slow breaths and focused, even as my mouth grew dry, and sound grew strange and muffled.

“We… can’t identify the bodies,” the younger auror went on, hesitantly, “but we found four wands. We’re fairly positive we have matches, all followers of You-Know-Who.”

His face, blandly pleasant, had a sick, gray pallor to it that probably reflected my own. He had the look of someone who smiled often, who might be something more than just pleasant when he did. Right now, though, his mouth was pulled into a tense line, brow furrowed, as he looked at the shredded remains. I wondered just how new he was to the field.

“Last spells cast?” Crawford asked sharply, eyes still skimming over the files. The agent licked his lips before continuing.

“Household stuff on two of them, Incendio on one, and… Imperius on the last. Nothing that could have done this.”

Crawford looked again at the gory spread before us. I didn’t.

“You don’t think the imperius could have—”

“Sir, there’s something else you should know.” the agent interrupted. Crawford’s eyes closed, his jaw clenched. Preparing, it seemed.

“Tell me.”

The agent shifted his weight as though he could shake off whatever news he had to deliver.

“We also found the remains of a fifth body, inside the house. A child. They… well, it looks like they ate her.”

Crawford didn’t move. He didn’t speak. I remembered Hannibal’s shallow breathing beside me, *Mischa*, I heard him whisper in the dark, *her name was Mischa*. Nausea rose in my throat.

“Do you have a theory, Brigham?”

The young agent shrugged,

“Could be deserters. The Death Eaters don’t treat traitors kindly, as we’ve seen. Or, could have been an internal struggle; the war’s over, they’re on the run, tensions are high. There’s six sleeping pads inside, and only four bodies.”

“Five,” Crawford corrected, “and the boy.” My heart stuttered as I realized he meant Hannibal. An image of small hands clutching at a blanket, of a slack mouth and large, dark eyes dulled and resting in shadow flickered briefly; the way Crawford had last seen him.

Brigham shook his head,

“No, they were keeping him in the barn, probably the other one too. I think we’re two Death Eaters short.”

They were silent for a moment, as Crawford looked back to the files, and Brigham twisted his mouth to the side.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Crawford waved his hand dismissively, and Brigham released a breath.

“We can’t say for sure what happened here. There’s just not enough to work with. But frankly, Jack... who gives a damn? Men like this,” he made a distasteful face at the snow, “the world is better off without them.”

Crawford chewed over the words a minute. He looked disappointed, somehow.

“Be that as it may,” he said, voice cold as the night around us, “and I’m not disagreeing with you, John, it’s our *job* to know.”

He tore his eyes from the blood-smeared snow, pressed the files into Brigham’s chest.

“Get me the next of kin. In the meantime, I want to talk to the boy.”

This time, when I came back to myself, it was not like falling, but fading. The snow, the sky, it all slipped away, replaced by the bleak light of Crawford’s office, his neat desk, his frames without portraits.

The man himself was silent, stone-faced. Seeing him like this, lined and tired the way he had not been less than a decade before settled something uneasy under my skin. This was the life he wanted for me. One that would leave me wrung out and worn, standing in fields of blood and talking about the deaths of children in dull, clinical tones.

“Sir,” I began nervously when he said nothing. He was unusually pale, his brow glittering with the sheen of sweat.

“No more lessons,” he interrupted, voice dull. It was like a slap. He’d spent so long cultivating my talent, pressuring me to hone it, and now… nothing? Just like that?

“Sir, I was only trying—”

“You did exactly as I asked, Mr. Graham, you’re not in trouble.”

He folded his hands, knuckles paling as he clenched them together. Panic beat frantic wings in my chest. *He knows*, I thought, breath suddenly shallow, pulse pounding in my ears, *he saw, and he connected, and he knows it was not the other Death Eaters that spilled all that blood.*

“Then what—”

“No more lessons for the time being. You are excused.”

I opened my mouth to argue, to apologize, I don’t know, but his eyes snapped open and he demanded,

“Now.”

It was sharp with command, the tone he’d used with Brigham in the memory.

I let myself out, and only then did I cry.

Chapter 24

Will | *Interlude*

He's sleeping. It hurts so much more, to see him this way, defenses down, features slack, relaxed. Too close to the boy he was in Jack's memory; pulled limp and small from the snow.

My eyes go, unwilling, to the pale streak of scar at his throat, twining out from his collar. He has other scars too, dents in the armor of another life. Traced by my fingers, reverently by my lips, but never leaving them in words, never asked about in languid moments, by silent agreement. Not that he wouldn't tell me, if I wanted, if he even knows, but I know the hurt they lock away, and I don't need to open that up.

Beyond that, it's hard now not to see the pale circle at his throat as the chain it was, blood-black and frozen to young, soft skin. I have no desire to see each mark for the wounds that put them there.

I watch the rise and fall of his chest for a moment, reassuring. I want to touch, to feel his breath, the pound of his heart, but I don't, I keep the distance, for now. A book on Potions lies open across his stomach; he was waiting up for me.

I love him, I know this, it mingles with the air in my lungs, as necessary and unchangeable as the impulse to draw breath; I love him. *I can't imagine myself without him, he is the closest thing to clarity, and when I'm with him, I know who I am. He looks at me and he sees all the strange turns, the oddities and unpleasantries, and he smiles, recognizes something of himself. He finds beauty in me. In all the parts of me that others turn away from, the dark corners, the crackle of power, the twisted impulses, he finds beauty, and I only saw the same once he made me look.*

Blood-smeared snow in my mind, now, and I try to reconcile it with his sleeping form, the sick, heavy knowledge sitting uneasy as my eyes trace his silhouette. He did this*, I try, taste its effect on me, and find it has none.* No*, my mind corrects,* they did this. *They hurt him, a painful tightening in my chest and I remember hands, small enough then that my palm alone could almost swallow them up, they hurt a child, and he survived. He is sitting here whole and safe in the green glow of his common room because their blood was spilled that day. He stirs, and I think he might wake, for a second, wonder what I would look like to him just now. Mad, probably. I don't think sane people find out truths like this and just accept them. Let alone feel…*

I would do it*, I think fiercely, suddenly, and the heavy truth of it scares me. If it was here, today, if someone was hurting him the way they did, while he was helpless, afraid, I would tear them limb from limb, paint the world scarlet with their blood, my rage. I wouldn't hesitate. I feel the itch of a predator, the cold, piercing knowledge of my nature. Even the thought has my pulse rising, the animal pound of blood in my chest, and on some level I know*

that this goes beyond self-defense, but that voice is quickly drowning as the river gives way to the crash of the ocean.

I kneel in front of the couch, slide the book from his lap and place it gently on the floor. My glasses follow.

For all the power I feel in this moment, the prickle of my silent vow, I can't give back what they took. I can't erase the darkness they spilled, and the truth of it is, he wouldn't be my Hannibal if I could. If there's another world out there, where he is happy and free from nightmares, from violence and horror, then in that world he has no need for me, strange and crooked thing that I am.

And he doesn't know. I'm sure of it. He suspects, and he dreams, sometimes, when the nights grow long and cold, but he doesn't remember what he did, doesn't know he left the job unfinished. He only knows they took her, and the rest is lost to the haze of nightmares.

For a moment, I think…

I imagine the low, heavy clunking of gears, and realize that we are at some critical split in our path.

I should tell him, share what I saw, what I know. Wouldn't he want me to? I let myself entertain it, head cocked, the drag of teeth across my lip. What would he do with the knowledge? I've decided that whatever nightmare creature lurks in him, whatever things he's done, will *do, I will accept, as I accept all of him. But would the world do the same?*

Would Jack?

I climb onto the couch, nudge my way under his resting arms. I lay my head on his chest and feel the change in rhythm as he wakes.

A small noise, of comfort, satisfaction that I am back. A sigh.

"How was your lesson?" he asks without opening his eyes, voice slurred by sleep, accent heavier in moments when he is not thinking of it. He is nearly fever-warm in contrast with the snow, imagined or not, and I bury myself further against him, lose myself in the scent of his skin. His hand finds my hair, strokes soft, heavy, across curls. I let his languor fill me, drag my limbs to sluggishness, slow my heart to match the beat of his.

"Making progress," I murmur, and let sleep take me.

Chapter 25

Hannibal

He is keeping something from me.

I am not entirely sure what it is, but it is something. And he knows that I know, and still he will not tell me. But he will also on occasion fail to find my eyes, look away with sudden urgency as though burned by something, by me, by a thought that I cannot follow, or on other moments, will look too long, stare unseeing through me, seeing me, but not me, something else. I merely stare back at him when these moments occur, wait with a raise of brow until he blinks to life and finds me again with a smile.

When I ask where he's gone, it's brushed away; *tired* or *you know my mind*, a crooked turn of lip, a shrug and then distraction. And that is factual, what he says. I do know his mind. I am the only one, truly, who knows his mind, so I know this has nothing to do with the curl of his powers, not the usual drifts when a particularly loud mind passes us by or he accidentally registers something he would much rather not. No. This is entirely different. Something personal that lingers between us, surrounds me, clouds his gaze when he's not careful. Words that dance on the tip of his tongue, and no matter how many times I taste it...and I do quite often, I cannot seem to draw them out.

I ask when he's red handed still tucking away the vestiges of reaction, murmur when he's tired, whisper my curiosity into his ear across the pillow, and between kisses. But it is always the same reaction. A shake of his head and a tired grin, a little wry and generally a pull away, *It's nothing, Hannibal*. But never quite wholeheartedly.

Only once, sleepily, his body tucked against mine, his fingers edging against my neck, does he give something more. I am in a loose shirt that is not to my usual tastes, gifted by Alana with a wink. More skin than I normally allow from my clothing, but it does have its advantages, I admit, and his fingers trace along my neck, find its hollows in the shadows, skim the raised white flesh of the scar. *Dead cells*, I want to tell him sometimes when he fixates there, dead cells cannot feel, touch wasted. But I suppose much the same could have been said about all of me before I met him, and so I allow the flights of fancy, let him curve his touch around it, pretend it is smooth and whole, reactive beneath his fingers.

"No, Hannibal." He mumbles, concentration on his tracing, over and over, a thumb and then a forefinger. "No, Hannibal, you'll..." There is a want on him, a want to tell me what I so long to be told, but a quiet fear draws along the desire. I try to read it, but he always manages to dance beyond my capabilities, always surprising, always changing. It is neither fear for me nor of me, but it lingers somewhere in the middle between the two, incapable of deciding. What has drawn this out of him?

Our eyes meet and there's an open awareness in him as he hesitates, something unwinding as he moves closer to admission, beneath the layers cozy sleep draws, beneath the affection and

the laughter, a curl of... darkness that cuts into me with a shiver, foreign but magnificent, a new facet, a chill of discovery. He has known of this, but I have not yet seen. I reach for him, for his cheek as his fingers still on my neck. Drawn by the sensation. Always, always something new. A fierceness that reaches back for me, shifts and grows in anticipation as I come closer, searching, needing.

“You’ll want too much.”

Low, the words curl, sharp edges around them, weary exhaustion as though he’s had this conversation with himself a million times, but he leans closer despite it, palm spreading on my neck, scar in the middle beneath it, surrounded, my hand tightening along his skin.

“And I’ll want to give it to you.”

I already do.

I hear in the next breath he draws, shallow, a precipice of sorts though I do not know what we are standing on. I am all but blind in this moment, what knowledge he buries, what he won’t say. It is heavy on him and it twists inside of him, he could but whisper it to me to release the weight, but he is stubborn. He swallows the burn of it so only the barest sear makes it to my lips.

“And we’d drown.”

The sliver of rawness in him glories in the thought of it, *I could tell you everything*, it whispers, *I could cut through your mind and show you, you could see what I know*. I can only watch it, a creature of bone and antler, snow drifting into the edges of my awareness. Something about the snow. He is projecting and I think he barely even realizes it. My connection stronger with this part of his mind than his own.

The snow in my own mind aches for completion. The ridges of empty, blank black that I have put aside are loud.

Something about the snow.

“But we’re happy, aren’t we, like this?”

The image blurs and disappears as his resolve strengthens once again with the words. He won’t tell me. Not tonight.

I nod, of course we are, of course, and still, the tantalizing brush with more, with other, my inability to let go the niggle of desire to know. I want to know, I consider, though I too can smell the destruction certainty would wreak. I am always sure I am strong enough. It has been proven time and time again I am not.

And I am. We are.

I endeavor to put it out of my mind. Allow him to kiss me relieved instead, though I think he mumbles, *promise me you wouldn’t do anything stupid*. I pretend not to hear and he not to say, focus instead on finding his lips, letting go the unease to be filled with something else

entirely. All traces of the roaring creature have vanished from him, he is nothing but open warmth, pleased affection and desire. He is nothing but Will, real and beside me. And perhaps, I tell the spectres in my mind stubbornly, that is more than enough. The shadows of what has been are that, shapeless and safe in their lack of contour. Will has all the colors, all the solidity, I should hold to that.

The warmth of his limbs slotting in against mine is soothing, makes it difficult to think of snow and blood, and I allow the images to drift away as he pulls me closer, shifts more on top of me, fingers dragging through my hair with more than a little pressure.

Enough for the sensation to become louder that the thoughts, enough to make sure I am with him. The kiss roughens.

I am going nowhere at present, all the same, I'm glad he holds tight.

Don't you have a lesson right now?

It is later that day, I am curious as to why he's casually sprawled all his work across the table and then ignored it in favor of settling in with his legs across my lap. No signs of shifting at all.

Crawford's busy.

A lie.

But he smiles and so I smile back.

I do not ask again about either.

H.L.

Chapter 26

Will

I love the way Hannibal's hands move over the keys. His eyes closed, back straight, he sways slightly in time with his playing, but it's his hands that hold my attention. Fluid, instinctual, water against the shore, it's almost like he's stroking the instrument to coax sound out of it rather than pressing keys.

It's a far cry from my staccato rendition of Heart and Soul.

The first time I found his little sanctuary, he didn't even hear me come in over the roiling of his song. I was able to watch him for a moment exactly as he was, uninterrupted, unchanged by my presence. He really is something more than human at times, and this was one of them; in the flickering glow of torchlight, his hands working the keyboard, moving through shadow breathlessly. I forgot momentarily that I was standing in an unused classroom, dust and chalk smells, and let the music and his mind twine through me, recall rain, light and cleansing, falling over me. He was beautiful. *Is.*

Granted, as much as I enjoyed the music, what I liked even more was squeezing between him and the keyboard, and seeing how well he could play with me heavy and demanding attention across his lap. (As it turns out, he's a determined multitasker, but even Hannibal Lecter has limits. There came a point where the light aria he was playing—arms on either side of my waist and me shifting my hips against him in suggestion, murmuring encouragement laced with innuendo between kisses—came to a sudden, crashing halt, as he found a more appealing use of his hands.)

After that, I was banished from the room for a while. Informed that the Fine Arts Society was not currently taking applicants—this said with a side-eye that warned me not to tease—and especially not ones that seemed so intent on destroying the instruments. I happily reminded him that it was not I who lifted my boyfriend to lay him across the keys in my impatience.

The next time I wandered down there, the door was locked.

Invited back in though, tonight. A storm was building around the castle, the crackle of frost on the grounds. It was dark by mid-afternoon, when a note found me. I mean this literally, it was enchanted to flit around me like a tiny, maroon bird, and nearly put my eye out in its eagerness for my attention. I opened the fine cardstock to find only a room number and a time. Always, the dramatics, and I smiled, wondered if he was going to allow my distraction again.

Imagine my surprise when, already dressed down for the day in anticipation of not needing my clothes for long, I turned a corner into the right hallway, and found *Alana*.

"Will," she said, face pinking. She drew her hand from the classroom door like it had burned her. Confusion warred in me with amusement. She looked every bit as baffled as I, only she

was doing so in a graceful sweep of silk, her hair half-piled on her neck, rather than ratty jeans and a gray t-shirt. “Are you here for…?”

There was a slip of maroon paper in her free hand, and the pieces fell together.

“The Fine Arts Society,” I groaned. I was going to kill Hannibal for not being more clear; my socks didn’t even match, my hair was an uncombed mess.

“The what?”

I rolled my eyes, reached for the door,

“Come on, I think we’re about to find out.”

Inside, candles floated lazily above our heads, red fabric swathed the windows and draped around the chairs, which had been arranged in a semi-circle facing the piano. Brian was sitting in one, Jimmy in another, both looking like they were toeing the careful line just before laughter.

Hannibal stood at the piano bench, arranging sheet music with a cool, pleased expression. He was wearing dress robes, I noted, and my weak resentment that I looked so shabby in comparison quickly simmered out as I became caught in watching the fine fabric move across his body. I did not take the seat next to Alana, sidling instead to his side. Ran my hand along the top of the baby grand, watching his eyes track the motion and narrow.

“Did you do all this?” I murmured, low beneath the hum of the others’ conversation. He smiled, pleased by the implied praise.

“Perhaps. I did have help.”

His eyes flickered to the music stand in front of the piano and, as if on cue, Bev slipped in, lugging a black case.

“You’re late, Ms. Katz,” he chided when she was close, though his playful smile took much of the menace out of it. She shot him a smoky-eyed glare over her shoulder as she pulled out a violin, a bow, and a small stack of papers.

“Fuck off, Lecter, I’m five minutes early.”

She too, was dressed as though this was a cocktail party and not a dimly lit classroom, in a sheath of a black dress that made her look at once stunning and fairly lethal.

I stepped between Hannibal and his task, watched faint displeasure crinkle his brow.

“I wish you’d warned me,” I grumbled, eyes flicking between the tailored line of his robes and my own clothes, “I thought…” I trailed off, implication clear.

“I know,” he said, lightly, unable to keep the note of smugness from his voice. My mouth fell open, indignance ready to pour itself out, but Bev turned again to Hannibal, this time with her instrument cocked jauntily against her chin.

“You ready?” she asked, flashing a smile. Hannibal looked pointedly at me. I bristled at the unspoken command, face burning,

“Oh. I’ll—”

I threw myself heavily into the seat on the end, next to Alana, crossed my arms.

My determination to sulk didn’t last long though, not with the music swirling around us. The candles dimmed as Hannibal took his seat and Bev raised her bow, and in the tense breath before they began, the only sound was the sleet against the windows.

Then, they played.

It can’t have been more than ten, maybe fifteen minutes, but I was so lost, it felt like hours. The way their sounds mingled, twisting through and around each other, sometimes warring, sometimes letting the other take center, always congruous, even when seemingly at odds. His thundering of keys was a perfect match for her sweet, eerie singing of strings, and they dove through different tones; light, melancholy, fierce, then slow, languid. I tore my eyes away from Hannibal for a moment to look at the others; they were as impressed as I was. Alana’s eyes were shining, her mouth parted slightly, and I bit my lip on a grin. Hannibal’s ego really did not need that stroke, but I was pleased for his sake anyway. Proud, I guess you could say.

When it ended, after a last mournful, thrumming note from Bev, and a final sounding chord on the keys, we were all silent. In shock, maybe. Bev looked up at us for the first time since they started, her eyes wide, cheeks flushed, grin still lingering, and I swear, she was looking right at Alana. A slight jolt went through me, the heaviness of her gaze, their eyes meeting, and I recognized the flavor of my own pride reflected in Alana’s mind.

The moment was broken when Jimmy started to clap, loudly, and Brian joined in with a whistle, and a shout of “encore!” I clapped too, shaking my head and laughing as Hannibal stood and bowed. Yeah, the praise was definitely going to go to his head. But I would be worshipful, tonight, if that’s what he wanted. I savored the thought for a moment, before tucking it away.

The others were crowding around them now, as curious as I about where he and Bev had been hiding this talent, but my eyes found Hannibal’s over their heads, and I smiled, felt the swell of his pleasure in the moment, in having created something beautiful. Alana had grabbed Bev’s hands in her own, was exclaiming through her tear-damp cheeks how great it had been, and I watched Bev’s unusually self-conscious, crooked grin in response with the creeping sensation that there had been more reasons than one for him to organize this.

I asked him later, our clothes strewn around us, the sleet outside the windows turned to a soft, quiet, snowfall, how he’d chosen the song. My hands were folded over his chest, my chin resting on them, so that each breath he took lifted me slightly, each exhale let me down. The candles had all gone out hours before, not long after the others left, so he was cast in the low gray light of the fading storm as he contemplated me, his hand in my hair.

“I didn’t.” he answered, voice rough from fighting sleep. My mouth twisted into a puzzled frown.

“Bev…?”

He shook his head slowly, amusement crinkling his eyes.

“We did not choose the song, we wrote it.”

Warmth filled my chest, my cheeks.

“I didn’t know you composed.” I inched my way up the length of him, put my elbows on either side of his head to lift some of my weight off. He looked up at me, in the silence, the shadows moving over us, in the way that he does when he’s adding something to his inventory of me. If he’s never seen me in awe of him before, he hasn’t been paying enough attention. His lips tightened into a smile, small, and though I’m not sure what uncertain would look like on Hannibal Lecter, I would say this came close.

“In a way, I suppose *you* chose it.”

I leaned down as he tilted up, kissed him, a press of lips that felt the way the song had sounded, my heart stammering weakly in my chest when his hand slid up my spine to grip at the back of my head. He laughed against my cheek, a huff of air as we parted, just enough space for words to fill.

“And whoever happens to be Beverly’s muse,” he added, as though he didn’t know. As though he hadn’t been in this same room earlier, seen the way Bev’s eyes tracked blue silk like it was water and she was dying of thirst. I tasted his amusement on his tongue when he arched up to kiss me again.

Sure. Whoever.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

Good morning journal.

It began, really, with a chill and a hole.

But I think it is at this point that I must admit that I have become rather hopelessly, chillingly, perhaps, addicted to this activity which is, in a quite embarrassing fashion, what one might perhaps call… *domestic*. I am fortunate that Will chooses to humor my newfound quirks, and does not find me any less "Ferociously intimidating Hannibal, it's completely terrifying that you want to spend the afternoon buying me socks. Really. That terrifies me." So, ehm, there is in fact, that convincing testimony.

The hole was Will's of course. The chill the weather's, but then also Will's, because of the inconvenience of the hole. In reality the entire sock was more hole than fabric, thin and worn, patched over a thousand times, in the muggle way, then with magic, and back to a needle and thread, but still the hole would resume appearing whenever Will's boots slipped off. It would creep back onto his heel, lurk suspiciously at his toe, stretch in the seams along his ankle. He would yelp annoyed when I prodded it, glare, in that stunningly endearing fashion of his, and attempt distraction until I forgot all about the worn wool. (It is, admittedly, not the foremost topic to occupy my mind.)

But there it would always be again, at the next available moment. It was not the same hole, oh no, but it quickly became apparent every one of Will's socks was in this sorry condition. Remiss of me to not have noticed sooner. Excusable, perhaps, as it had been warm enough to forgo socks inside up until recently, but as the days grow shorter, especially underground in my house, the stone of the floor can nip terribly. I watched him for several days as he gingerly avoided allowing the bare spots to brush the ground, my lips you can imagine growing thinner and thinner despite such refrains as "it's fine, Hannibal." "I have thick feet to go with my thick head, you know that." and if possible my least favorite:

"I'm used to it. These are better than last year."

My lips, as I said, almost invisible. Beyond my disdain of his needless suffering, I am really not a proponent of holes. I think Will enjoys them in some things, in his jeans, poked through his sweater to loop his thumb through, but to me...to me they spell a lack of order that I cannot abide by. On him, on occasion, but never on me. The notion of it, especially of it having been *worn* through the fabric, because of use, because of the inability to have something but...well, the shadows of that have not left me. I believe I wore the same three shirts for exactly one year, eight months, and five days, and the memory, though dim, lurks.

That terrible dirty, dusty, feeling, the lack of one's own things, the lack of anything comforting. Only rough fabric in an unstoppable state of deterioration.

But I digress. I do not believe that is what Will feels. I know he is proud of the use his clothing provides him with, that he cares for it as well as he can, does his best to prolong the life of the little that he does own. He is sometimes less than careful, but even when it is my clothing flying off, there is a certain understanding, I think, between us. He has ceased to listen to my whinings about simply tossing it aside though, (*fold it, Will, fold it*,) terrible, a terrible complacency, and so soon in our relationship. Hmph.

And so, I did the deed.

The holidays were close enough so that I could plead present if necessary, not that I would plead or explain anything, but on the off chance that would be what was required to ensure he kept them, I could. I sent for a catalogue from my favorite shop, ready to select the most enticing pair, buy eight and have it simply left at that.

But I… I should have recalled, obviously, but I forgot in that moment before I opened the magazine...truly, that amount of colors that socks could come in. Should I buy him Cerulean for his house? Or Emerald for mine? Was there a way to arrange stripes? Or...perhaps even...plaid. Will loves plaid. Well, perhaps on socks, *I* love plaid, but...in any case. I became a bit absorbed. Perhaps obsessive, as I am known to be. Ensconced in the buying of socks. And when it was done, there is a slight possibility that I went a bit insane with sock purchasing and accidentally ordered something akin to a small mountain. But I was...only thinking about Will's toes and they were cold, and I had been terribly remiss to have allowed them to be for so long.

Ehm.

The matter of the fact is that I purchased the socks. And only ever intended to purchase the socks, but upon returning to my room the next evening, I could not help opening up the catalog again. There could be something else Will would like; he is lacking sweaters too, and those jeans of his either hang too loose or sit too tightly, and, in truth I enjoy shopping, and clothes shopping most of all. I would much prefer to be present in the store, running my fingers along everything, overseeing the precise fit, inhaling the crisp scent of items yet unworn. Wholly new. But even through the catalog, there's well, a beauty to it, and when combining it with the fluttering warmth that appears every time I even think of that curly haired wretch. Well.

And there they were. A sweater so hideous I could barely stand it, chunky grey green wool, over-sized and shapeless, a scarf in the blue green of his eyes, embroidered *Lecter* sneakily on the inside, a hat, the same terrible material as the sweater. Leather gloves, well, on second thought, I like that he pushes his hands into my pockets insistently instead, no gloves. Gloves. The temptation of a coat too much—

I admit, for but a breath, I paused to consider if I would offend him. If all of this would cause glower and retreat. Insistence that he had everything he could need, that he did not need my help. But I was not, I reasoned—distracted almost entirely by an appalling t-shirt with a cartoon dog on it—buying this for him because I thought he needed my aid. (Though, seeing

the holes vanish would be something of a personal relief.) No, simply because I… because I wished to.

And suddenly there were dozens of parcels dropping at my place during breakfast. Will curiously looking on as I hastily pushed them beneath the table. A slight curl of dread, I admit, as the number of them rose and rose.

Finally, I surprised him. Like a bandage, straight off, one motion. And, really, I am Hannibal Lecter. I am not afraid of doing anything. Certainly not of giving my boyfriend (two noted uses of the title.) sweaters. (All of whom have my name embroidered somewhere on them. What can I say, I am possessive. I do not pretend otherwise.)

All of it was folded in neat piles on his covers. And I waited, arms crossed for him to walk in, his roommate rolling his eyes and abandoning the space. Good.

“I apologize.”

It came out perhaps a bit more flustered than intended and I corrected quickly, as he froze, eyes going to the mountain of fabric on his bed, blinking.

“I do not believe I can stop”

Another blink.

“Hannibal, are those, is that—” He sounded overwhelmed for a moment, my mouth twisting in a frown. “Jesus, is that for me?”

“If you don’t like it, I can -”

But already he had taken the three steps to cross into my space, fingers going to rest gentle across my cheeks. Warm, fond, amusement.

“You’re awful, you know that?” his whisper was warm, a bright pleasure in it, something shivering through us both, his satisfaction, at being thought of, at my typical fashions of me, which he would not exchange for the world. “Really awful.”

I let him kiss me, but not onto the piles of new clothes. But, well. I’ve learned the merits of the floor.

He’s wearing one of his sweaters now, feet safely ensconced in fabric. I think it pleases me more than him. But that pleases him, and so here we are, in this sickeningly sweet web.

It is wondrous.

Yours,

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Late update today, I (Q) had midterms, and so the boys had to take backseat for a second (a position they, incidentally, just rather enjoyed in the segment of year seven we just wrote). Hope you guys like the domestic bliss for the moment, we really had fun with this nice little reprieve.

But uh, don't get too comfortable.

Leave us a comment if you enjoyed, we love hearing from you and we promise to catch up on replies soon! (I, for one, can breathe again today, so I'll find a moment, promise.)

Chapter 28

Will

Everything feels so warm. Hannibal—his cheeks unusually flushed with heat and drink and laughter—is sharing this chair with me, our legs half-tangled, his arms draped loosely over my shoulders. There's a fire going in the grate, loud and crackling, and filling the room with a sweet, heady winter kind of smoke. Burning pine. The Hufflepuff common room is on the ground floor, unlike the subterranean Slytherin dorms or the frigid Ravenclaw tower, and so it's here, with the kitchens nearby, that we chose to bunker down during this winter storm.

I had… a little too much wine. I've got that giddy, overextended feeling right now, my mind open to those around me, welcome mat spread. Alana is laughing at something Jimmy said; I didn't catch the joke, but her mirth spreads a grin across my face. Hannibal's looking at me now, amused. There's a dangerous kind of playfulness to him, an edge that makes his eyes dark, his smile cutting. And he knows, of course, he knows how I am right now, pliant and suggestible. Full to the brim with wine and contentment, mine and other.

His eyes flicker across my open collar, and over the length of me. He hides nothing, his appreciation singing in the air, one sweet, high note that I taste before his hand skims down my back to rest at my hip. Such a subtle movement, but his intent is clear—eyes never leaving me. He's playing me like an instrument right now, plucking at need with careful, practiced hands, watching my every reaction as though it's he that has the empathy disorder. I try to shoot him a scrunch-nosed look *yes, I know what you're doing*, but even that is tempered by the sudden turn his mind makes when I twist to face him. His eyes linger at my throat, and I have a very clear image of myself pressed under him, his teeth grazing at the junction of my neck and shoulder while his hands draw shudders along my skin.

Fuck.

Sensitive, I feel too hot and oversensitive, and he's got a small, knowing smirk, and he's toying idly with the hem of my shirt, and Brian is saying something about chess but I stopped paying attention to their conversation somewhere between glass three and four—

I hoist myself off Hannibal's lap, a glare, real this time, only slightly swaying, and make an excuse to leave. The kitchen, I say, for some food, but nobody seems to hear, really, maybe I only said it in my head. The others let me go with barely a glance, but Hannibal watches with eyes dark from his pleased, slouched place in the armchair, as though I am the most fascinating thing he's ever seen.

I only stumble a little, leaving the dormitory, and for that I am profoundly grateful. The halls are dark—I'm not supposed to be up, but during holidays, the skeleton crew of staff that remain at the castle are less than vigilant. I do consider actually going to the kitchens, although my stomach is full of sweets and wine, but then I remember the lateness of the hour, realize that even house elves must sleep.

So I wander. Not the safest course of action, tempting fate maybe, but to hell with it, I've skimmed along the borders of trouble for long enough that one detention won't kill me even if I do get caught. Mostly I'm just in need of air, and space, and if I'm dragging my hands along the stone walls, it's because the cool, rough texture is pleasant on my fingertips. It's eerie right now, the howl of the storm echoing hollowly through these chambers, through me.

"Spooky," I say aloud, with a low whistle, and it turns into a giggle as I round another dark corner. I wonder how long it will take Hannibal to tear himself away from his argument with Brian about the merits of muggle chess—ha, I was paying *some* attention—and come find me.

It's cold, I realize, the chill working through me from my socked feet to my cheeks, and I wish I'd thought to grab my sweater off the back of the armchair, a hideous mass of green wool that Hannibal bought me and I'm missing now. My arms wrap around my torso compulsively.

I pause. I'm somewhere near the caved-in passage where we once played cards and told truths. And where I unwittingly witnessed what I'm pretty sure was Brian and Jimmy's first kiss. A crooked smile works its way across my face, I wonder if that night had woken any curiosity in Hannibal the way it had in me. Then a tilt of my head, as I consider the mirror that I can now see glimmering ahead.

There is a way to find out…

Dangerous, it's dangerous to play with my gift this way, but I'm full of liquid confidence, and fuck it, it's been months now since my last lesson, since I've had any chance to really, actively use it, so I shoulder the mirror out of the way, exposing the tunnel behind, just enough to squeeze through. Dark, too dark, so I fumble for my wand from my pocket, a hastily whispered *Lumos*, and blue swathes the rubble in front of me. It's so small, I think, wondering how we fit six of us in here—*five*, I amend, Alana was not part of our little group yet—even smaller versions of us.

I sit, where I have many times before, though not in some time, hands spread on the cold stone floor. A deep breath, chest filling with the scent of rock and earth, and I reach for Hannibal.

A pendulum sweeps.

I am smaller, my leg is pressed to someone next to me, burning contact that I allow, only him, only this, tendrils of something coiling sharp through me, and I allow it not because I am not afraid, but because I find, curiously, I *want* it, any previous conditions I set to keep others from my spaces, from the things that are mine no longer apply here, with the pleasure of touch, of company. Jimmy and Brian negotiate the terms of their deal.

The image falters, I am in limbo, there is something far stronger than our game of truth or dare pulling at me, and I let it, curiosity making me reckless, heady power in using this magic that comes so naturally in the way that it was meant to; I let it take me where it will, unthinking of the consequences.

Pain. It comes on suddenly, sweepingly, and I struggle to rack in breath around my sobs. *He can't find me here*, I think wildly, *not if I can just stay quiet*, so I wrap my arms more tightly around myself, wary of my bruised ribs, and bite my lip on the cry that tries to tear itself from me. Could he really use that curse? It's not supposed to be allowed, he can't, Papa would never let him, but even that, doubt flickers through me, is not entirely true. His threats to make me jump from the astronomy tower still echo in my ears, and I have learned the hard way never to underestimate my brother's capacity for cruelty. Mason's footsteps echo down the hall and I cover my mouth with one white-knuckled hand, squeeze my eyes shut and try to wish him away.

I snap back to myself, although the memory was so intense that for a moment, I'm still not sure who I am. I'm clutching my pants at the knees, my breath is still coming out hitched, uneven, but slowly, slowly, I am Will Graham.

"Will?"

I startle at the sound, the familiar, commanding voice, although it mostly sounds confused, concerned now. I look up through the opening at Jack Crawford.

There must be something of the animal panic in my eyes still, because the stormclouds of anger don't fully form, something snaps to attention in him, concern wins out. He reaches an arm out, and I let him tug me out of the passage, roughly to my feet.

"Sorry, m'sorry," I mumble, pressing the heels of my palms to my eyes, hoping I look more tired than drunk, knowing that's unlikely. He just watches me with small, dark eyes that pierce. I hope I won't be in detention for too long.

"What are you doing up?" he asks. I can't meet his eyes, thinking still of our last lesson, of the cold, distant way he's talked to me in class since then, but I try to at least make it look like I am, staring sheepishly at his forehead while his hand settles on my shoulder. Was I leaning?

"I… sometimes it just—" I shrug, wishing his hand was less heavy, wishing it wasn't on me at all, "pulls at me, I'm sorry, I'll go back to bed."

Something whirs in him; calculation, curiosity, a sighting of potential. An idea strikes flint against the surface of his mind, catches, but I don't know what it is. I *am* tired, now, exhausted, and I wonder how long I've been gone, if they miss my presence yet, if I'll even be able to sneak my way back into the Hufflepuff dorms or if I'll be banished to Ravenclaw tower alone. Hollow aching, I miss the tree and the lights and the fire. And Hannibal. I feel shaky, cold, weak all over, I want him near me, want to pull strength from his, want arms to lay me down and lips to sleepily brush the back of my neck as we rest.

"You do that," Crawford says at last, releasing my shoulder, though his hand still hovers, as though to catch me if I stumble again. I blink stupidly at him for a minute; *I'm not in trouble?* I almost say. But maybe I should be used to this by now, he has shown a tendency to bend the rules where I'm concerned, to let me get away with more than I should as long as it plays into his hand. I just nod, unsettled by his searching glances, whatever idea has taken root there,

my silent *thank you* implied, and I turn to go. There's stairs in the next corridor that lead to the tower, maybe I can double back.

"Mr. Graham."

I stop, the command sharp in his voice, and I wonder if I was too presumptuous in thinking I could get away like this. A fearful look over my shoulder, and there's a small smile that looks out of place on his features.

"Hufflepuff dorms are that way," he says, and my mouth falls open. "I'm sure Mr. Lecter is worrying about you by now."

I can't do anything other than nod, grateful again, and head back in the direction of the kitchens. I'm not sure if it's the drink or the shadow of unreality the memory left me with, but I'm almost certain I hear quiet laughter as I round the corner.

Chapter 29

Hannibal

Merry Christmas Journal,

I'll have to be brief here, because already Jimmy is fidgeting at the sound of my scratching quill, murmuring something unintelligible in his sleep, his arm cast over Brian's face, covering it, but not, regrettably, the snores.

Bev is curled up on the couch further into the room and Alana is nestled against her knees, *girl talk*, they'd giggled, a little tipsy, exchanging grins, as though they needed to offer some kind of explanation for the predicament. And indeed whispers came, as they drew together in careful inches. I can see Alana's hair falling now like a silky curtain across Bev's knees, and she's smiling in sleep, clear even in the dimness. Bright. Perhaps one day, they will forgo such inanities as bothering to pretend.

Will has insinuated we ought not to interfere. But I can remember a time when a certain outspoken Ravenclaw refused to let me shrink away so easily, so perhaps I won't listen to him at all. Whatever he says, he enjoys me best when I'm difficult. When I make him make those sputtering sounds and cover his face...or other sounds, hrm.

A silent smile in the darkness.

For our part, we have no such excuses any longer. Will is sprawled out, his head on my lap, his fingers twisted into the silky fabric at my thigh. An hour ago they were tracing paths there idly, his eyes closed and heavy. *Dangerous*, I murmured to him, and he hummed his agreement, rough from his throat, pleasantly amused and ignored the word. Not so dangerous truthfully, neither of us would dare steal more than a kiss in a room full of our friends, in the companionable space created around us, all of our affections twined together into easy comfort. I could not have imagined that Brian's snores and Bev's even breaths, the presence of bodies, of more than that, of souls, that I care for, would fill me with such warm contentment. I know I can often not imagine, but it is no less true every time I catch myself marvelling at the truth of it. I would not perhaps stake on them what I do with Will, but their meaning wraps itself around me, and strangely, I am glad for it. It is not the first Christmas I shared, rife with the potential of something greater, still in a world of silent wanting, believing for the first time, in the possibility. Nor the barely faded, but slowly forgotten, anguish of the year past, memories and misery. It isn't the quiet Christmases with my aunt, and still not the disregarded ones of my childhood.

No.

This, I think, for the first time journal, is one for family. Will and Bev and Alana, Brian and Jimmy as well, those who clawed and slipped their way into my existence and will not

simply be removed. There is something to be said for a hard-won battle, and there is no fight more difficult than the one across my walls. Alana would laugh if I said such a thing, and Bev would roll her eyes,

“You’re so dramatic, Lecter.”

I can imagine her hands on her hips, the jaunt of them as she snorts. Brian’s almost imperceptible pout, arms crossed, muttering out the corner of his mouth that he too can be capable of drama. With a patronizing pat from Jimmy quick to come, the squabble that would follow. I do not think I would wish for their normalcy, but they wear it well. As well as we wear our lack of it.

Will would smile his crooked grin, whisper in my ear that he understood. Warm lips drifting to find mine.

The visions vanish as I blink, all the sleeping forms unmoved, bathed in the red blue lights of our tree...

We’ve set it in the corner, the small scraggly thing smuggled from the Great Hall when no Professor was about. And it is laden with a rather atrocious mess of decorations. My insistence on proper glass baubles, Will’s desire, backed by loud approval from Brian, for popcorn strands, and then his collection of dog shaped ornaments, Bees for Jimmy, Bev and Alana’s cut snowflakes and snowmen, and a smattering of half even (my doing), half snarled (everyone else’s), strands of lights. Still, it stands, somehow, despite the weight of everything, and for that, I must respect it. Acknowledge its determination not to falter despite our best efforts, and stand watch over the pile of gifts that seems rather a lot more than any I have witnessed outside the occasional Holiday Balls I attended now and again. With my aunt, I simply bought what I pleased, punctuated by a small token she thought I might enjoy. Before that, a book, if there was luck, potatoes, if there wasn’t. So I am, I will admit, somewhat keen to attempt this tradition of gifts. I enjoy, as you well know, being thought of.

But, shockingly enough, and gaping is rather rude, I will remind you, I enjoyed purchasing them as well. And not only for Will, though of course, he began the whole damnable affair with his holes.

New ribbons for Alana, of as many shades as socks for Will, a rather rare honeysuckle for Jimmy, A Hufflepuff sweater for Brian (I’m sure he will be very appreciative. He ought to be, at any rate; Jimmy certainly will), a new bow for Bev since we are due to wear her old one out at any session, and for Will...well. Beneath the tree there are more varieties of scarves and hats. But it is rather possible there is something a bit more *sweeping* awaiting him in his dormitory.

(That is funny, because it is a broom.)

Uncannily, as though he knows I am thinking of him, a yank is coming at my arm, making it rather difficult to continue to write. This is purposeful sabotage. Very naughty. Tut, tut.

“You’re not asleep.” A slur against my skin, I shudder at the brush of breath, another tired yank on my arm. “Come sleep, ‘annibal.”

Well.

I am a very obedient boyfriend. Let no one ever attempt to say otherwise. I shall document this moment and bring it out later when I am told that I am rather impos-

"*Hanbal*."

Goodnight journal, I should hope you have bought me something nice as well.

H.L.

Chapter 30

Will

Last night, I dreamt of a stag.

I was at the river, though it was not the placid summer stream I usually call up when I'm conscious; a fiction spun from many road trips, and many rivers with Dad. A place that exists nowhere, but can be found everywhere.

No, in the dream it was Autumn; the leaves aflame with color, the sky a perfect, cold blue. The current surged around my knees as I waded into the icy water, and I was aware that despite—or maybe *because* of—the vibrance of the colors, the crisp reality of fall air and crunching leaves, this was not real.

Armed with this knowledge, I stepped further and further in, feeling stones and mud beneath my boots, admired the addition of spiraling maple seeds. It was peaceful this way too, despite the chill, the rush of the water. I filled my lungs with smells of loam and leaves.

Then, as I stood waist-deep in the cold heart of the current, movement dragged at my vision; the ripple of muscle under the dappled light at the trees' edge. I watched as the nightmare beast stepped into the light.

I was not afraid.

The stag, an unlikely combination of dark hide and black feathers watched me with ancient eyes, its nostrils flaring, the spray from the crashing water between us glittering on its flank. Massive, deadly-looking antlers branched from its head, a crown of knives. When it lowered them, I stepped back, almost lost my footing on the slippery river bottom, as an image of myself impaled on them flashed before me. But it never charged. Just regarded me with black, endless eyes, and then nosed into the current to drink.

I woke in the grey-blue hours before dawn, the image still lingering in my mind.

Carefully, so as not to wake Hannibal, I untangled my limbs from the blanket we'd spread across the couch. We found this room by chance one evening, not wanting to part for the night, and there it was. A door set in otherwise plain stone, inside just four cold walls, a window—though it defies all logic of space and time, considering it's in the middle of the castle—and a sofa, a table and two chairs. Slowly, each time we've snuck away to it, things began to appear, and though I'm still not convinced Hannibal is innocent of it, I don't question the presence of a record player, a small cupboard that seemingly grew out of the wall, a trunk full of well-worn blankets. It's a safe place to be alone, and that's all that matters to me.

He stirred when my weight left the cushions, but didn't wake. I think he dreams now—and they're just that, for the most part. He hasn't woken in the panicked grip of a nightmare in some time. I like to see him like that, eased into the cushions, nothing but the shallow, even sound of his breathing filling the cold morning air.

I wanted to slip into his skin and go where he goes. Are his dreams like mine? Comforting horrors? Sometimes I dream of snowy fields soaked with blood, and I look on and only feel quiet satisfaction. I doubt that's what he's watching in the landscape of his mind.

Or maybe he dreams of earlier days, filled not with fishing lures in small fingers, the smells of smoke and leather and coffee, but his own memories. I hope he has them, happy things to fall back on when nightmares threaten, though he never talks about the time before he came to live with his aunt.

I was drawn to the window, while these thoughts clouded my mind; these and the stag, its eyes. Outside, winter was still strong, fog rolling in from the lake over grounds blanketed in snow. My breath misted the panes and I traced nonsense lines there, looked out through the crisscrosses at the gray paling of the night sky where dawn would break.

"Where do you go?"

I smiled at the sound of Hannibal's sleep-rough voice, let my hand fall to my side. Of course he was awake. The cold was raising goosebumps across my bare arms, so I resigned myself to staying up, retrieved my sweater from where it lay crumpled on the floor. Hannibal's eyes were sleep-clouded, slitted and glittering in the half-dark as he watched me dress. The panes of glass cast lines across his face that bent as he smiled. Clothed in shadows. It suited him.

"When you are dreaming," he clarified, and there was a strange note of amusement to his voice, "Not physically, of course."

Clad once again in green (which seems to be his favorite color on me, shocker) I grinned at him, though I didn't get the humor.

"Can't we leave some mystery between us?"

There it was again, the sour note in the chord. I didn't want to tell him about forests and chains and blood—nor the stag, though it was maybe the least worrying of my dreams so far—but I also didn't want to outright lie. We've been keeping secrets, and although his expression didn't change, I saw the careful neutrality for what it was—*mistrust*.

I wanted to reach out for him, close the gap I'd created, however small and however noble in intent. Kiss his cheek, smooth his hair and in the same motion smooth away the worry I felt growing in his chest.

But there was a letter from Jack Crawford in my bag, folded and unfolded several times. All his carefully thought-out words smeared in blue ink, implications resonating from each line. He's changed tactics: instead of appealing to my ambition (finally realized I'm lacking in that department, I guess) this letter is full of subtly layered guilt. *How would you feel to know that there are people you could have helped?* He never outright says it, but the intent is clear.

Even more nefarious, in my opinion, are his attempts to lay Hannibal's past at my feet. Little barbs that whisper, *you could stop what happened to him from happening again.*

Being aware that it's a ploy, however, doesn't make it any less true. We're resuming our lessons tonight.

I let my eyes slide past Hannibal's disappointment in my lack of confession to the window again.

"The River," I said.

It's as much truth as I could allow, and he took it in stride. Uncoiled to his feet, stretched heavy limbs and, as though there was no snag to be smoothed, pulled me to him. We kissed, with lips only, my mind was far away, and his eyes, they were as empty as the stag's.

Chapter 31

Hannibal

“Honestly Margot, did you really think I wouldn’t fin—”

I turned the corner in the library earlier today, into the above statement made in a terribly lazy drawl, but a very ready wand drawn, backing a girl up against a shelf, heedless of the disarray it was causing in the books. A pile she appeared to have dropped spread at her feet. The wand vanished quickly at my appearance, the scowl, ready to break into a full fledged tantrum, fading away from the boy’s face as I bent to retrieve them for her, a smile no less ugly crossing his features instead.

“Margot.”

The cadence of his tone was only barely tolerable, as though it were suddenly drumming on my last nerve, past the protection of my skin and right against the exposed endings themselves, aggravation curving into me, muscles stiffening, back straightening, at simply the sound of it. A bristle, if you will.

“Thank the nice Slytherin for his troubles.” Lofty command, pleased to make her bow to his whims. A callous kind of control, obvious and weak.

Her sharp eyes turned to me, up and down, considering. To her credit, the only outward defiance came from the slight flaring of her nostril, the barest twist of lip, I could scent the bitterness of fury, the sourness of fear, but the darker undertone stirring of something torrential and vengeful. The boy beside her too caught up in his own piggish entertainment to notice the quickly growing hostility that was wrapping around them both. Or if he did, he hadn’t a care for it. I might have told him that was a mistake, the sort of rough rage hidden behind the coolness of gaze would need little more than a hint of suggestion, an opportune moment, to burst into conflagration, flames that would catch his ostentatious robes and cinder him before he could so much as plead for help. But his self lauding smirk, too-big eyes, almost bounce, moved me little.

He would learn, I had little doubt. Perhaps I would be fortunate enough to witness it. I think I have seen him before, but not met. I certainly could not have forgotten.

“Thank you.” Her smooth regality comes slightly surprising from her small frame, the casual way she moves even as she speaks, “Kind Slytherin Boy.”

It comes with a toss of hair, a throaty twist of amusement instead of submission, but she vanishes as fast as her legs can carry her, betraying something all the same.

“Sisters!” The boy exclaims in a disappointed huff from behind me, turning my cheek back towards him, careful stone set on my face. “Un-*bearable*.” A shake of his strangely spiky hair, looking around at me.

“Do you have a sister?”

Dangerous territory.

“I did.”

It’s in soft poison. But it doesn’t seem to strike him as a warning not to tread.

“Well whatever made it past tense, you must be relie—”

I think it is possible there would a rather pineapple shaped hole in the library wall just now, had his eyes not widened mid-thought, turned appraisingly calculating, the insipid cogs in his mind shifting overtly. “Say—”

A step closer. Cloying, his aggravating nature

“Say, say, say.”

It is an utterly unappealing quality in a person, a bounce.

“You,” A finger in my face, and then pressed into my chest. You can imagine my face, journal, as I slowly turned my chin down to gaze at it, truly unbelieving that it was really there, that he was really *touching* me, “are little Graham’s friend, aren’t you.”

Little? Is rather the first thought that crossed my mind. As though this wretch were any bigger. Perhaps if height of hair were included. Certainly not, I can assure all those reading, which had better be only me, in muscle mass. In the seconds his finger was on me I knew I could snap it and the rest of him with little effort, if I only applied some *pressure*.

Ehm.

But in seconds, where it is I’d seen him came back into sharp relief. “And you, are Krendler’s.”

Cool, but he seemed only more amused, a wide grin spreading across his face. I think he thought it to be predatory, but he could push his finger against my tie as many times as he’d like, I certainly was not about to be backed into a shelf. Perhaps he was hoping I would reach for my wand, show some outward distress, but I only stared at him.

“Guilty.” He laughed, sounding not very much so at all, blinking at me for a moment, before he made his own further recognition, or a play at it. “Oh yeah, *that’s right*, the hair…”

I might have simply bitten his hand when he touched it, I really might have.

“He can be such a terrible brute sometimes. But, in hindsight...” he took it back to himself, smirking, “I think we can all agree it was all just in *harmless* fun.”

That he saw me at that moment enrages me like little else at present, I think it is very safe to say. That he was there, that he enjoyed it. I believe there might have been some nostril flaring of my own.

“Yes.” My teeth bared in what should certainly not have been mistaken for a grin and I stepped forward myself, pleased when he faltered at that, cowing back just a hair.

“But rather—”

Another step, and it was rather a bit better with the tables turning; he does not retreat very gracefully. My softness turning to hiss.

“Tasteless.”

A pause.

“I’m sure *we can all agree*.”

Dull red flushed into his cheeks, irritation, but realization, I think, that he wasn’t at the correct odds for a fight. Of course not, lacking his brawn. Shame. He is lucky that I have a care for the books.

I did not need him to reply.

“Now what was that about Will?” I asked, watched as he attempted to pull his irritating bravado back up, mouth curled unattractively. “You were telling me how you had no interest in ever setting yourself within the farthest line of his sight? That is perhaps what I heard.”

“*Papa* says.” A fine tremor of haughtiness in his voice, finally found though I wish had gone so far away that it would never return, “that Vergers never bow to threats. And I *am* a Verger.”

Somewhere it struck me that I recognized the name, synonymous with wealth, corruption, and inhumane treatment of magical creatures for rare meats. But at the moment, it did not matter what his name was, he appeared to me little more than an ant. It still. Fails to matter now.

“You may kneel then.” My not-grin widened and he retreated another half step as I crossed my arms. “And do so far away from my presence, or Will’s.”

He was almost to the end of the bookshelf, ready to dodge into plain sight by the time he spoke again, I still in place.

“You shouldn’t interfere my affairs. *Hannibal*.”

And then gone.

Perhaps I should not have pushed. But I must admit, it made the blood sing nicely in my veins, fed a craving hungering dormant in my core. I have no intention of making

unnecessary trouble. But a little savagery in with my sweetness did make for a change not wholly displeasing, allowed the blood to pump.

I shall have to keep a more careful eye from now on. On this Verger and his sister.

H.L.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal | *Interlude*

Fierce kisses between us and Will laughs, pushes me back down against the bed with force as he tastes the playfulness of my mood. The irritation of the earlier altercation has drifted away, Mason all but forgotten, but the fight in my veins is still roaring. I stay in place for a breath, smirking, as he bends to kiss me, but before he quite makes his mark, flip him onto the mattress instead, growling as he catches my wrists and forces himself sitting instead of lying, to kiss me as he intended, all the same.

"What did you do?" He questions breathlessly, teeth grazing against my collarbone, biting the words into my skin. "You did something." His eyes are lidded as he glares at me, pushing himself closer, fingers still gripping my wrists, forcing them between us. He nudges closer on his knees, his rough jeans grazing the outside of my legs.

I smile, my own touch finding the hem of his shirt and pulling it roughly out. "Who, me?" Whispering innocence.

"You."

I allow nothing, only blink.

"Tell me what then you know that you will not tell me."

He draws back up at that, presses our foreheads together, and we still, nothing but breaths between us, shuddering, my hands on his back, his on my arms. Skin on skin on skin on skin. More, soon. Our bodies ache to move forward, but. We.

We pause. Share the lengthening minute.

"Fine."

He murmurs and he pushes through it, literally, we topple over, his body covering mine, our lips pushing together again.

"Keep your secrets."

"And you."

Words are lost after that.

Chapter End Notes

Triple update, and early today :) I have to say, I certainly enjoy Mason as a plot device, but the motherfucker really does *talk* in *italics*. If anyone has a way to preserve the formatting when copying the text from docs, I would love to hear it, because I was very moved by Hannibal's threat of making a pineapple shaped hole in the wall when I was hunting for those random words that Mason so loves to emphasize. (But bravo to Ro for writing some of the most convincing Mason dialogue ever, in this chapter and some of those to come. I will gladly wear wrist-braces in exchange for her characterization of him.)

See you all again on Tuesday
—Q

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

What do I feel?

...alone.

It's my own fault, but that doesn't take the sting from it, or make the shadows move less like reaching hands.

Today, when I stepped into Professor Crawford's office, the bland set of the stones now familiar and reeking of dread, I was surprised to see him smiling across his desk at me. Considering how our last session had gone, I had prepared myself for anger, for stern disapproval, but I had not readied myself for the pleased, knowing look he gave me. Like we were two old conspirators in some game I wasn't aware that I was playing. I lowered myself into the single, creaking chair across from him warily.

He chuckled at my mistrust, full to the brim with congratulation that I felt was, at best, preemptive, considering we hadn't started yet.

"No need to look so scared, Mr. Graham," He shifted back and forth in his seat, folded big hands in front of him and watched me for an uneasy second. Something primeval always coils in my chest when he looks at me like that, instinct tensing my muscles for escape. He let out a sigh.

"I think it's time we changed tactics. I've been trying to force you to do things how I would do them, had I your," he gestured vaguely. A motion that I felt was far more contrived than he'd like me to think, "natural abilities."

I nodded, still unsure of where he was going. I could have told him as much long ago. Had told him, in fact, many times, that what he was asking me to do went completely at odds with what my empathy urged me to.

He reached below his desk then, and I heard the rumble of a drawer, contents being disturbed. When his hand resurfaced, it was wrapped in a green-striped tie.

He reached across the desk, the silk of Slytherin house dangling limply from it. When I didn't move, he nodded for me to take it. I squirmed beneath his heavy eyes, not liking the intensity of his gaze, but after a moment of hesitancy, I lifted cautious fingers out, took the fabric between them.

Crawford watched, enraptured.

“Well?” he asked.

“Sir?” I answered, not sure what he wanted from me. He was looking at me like he’d expected some kind of grand transformation just by handing me a thin slip of green silk.

“What can you tell me about it?”

“Um, well it’s a tie,” I offered, still holding it like it might actually turn into a snake and bite me. Crawford’s eager face clouded for a moment, but he covered it quickly.

“Will. *Try*.”

Oh.

I felt my face redden, stupid to not have realized before. Of course he wanted me to reach, why else were we here? I mean, he could have picked a little less mundane an object. He may as well have handed me a toothbrush, or a flannel, for all the clarity it had provided.

I took it in both hands now. Nothing pulled at me from it as things sometimes did, nothing overly potent about it. It was just a tie. Something that somebody put on every day. I smoothed a finger over the stripes, relaxed the boundaries of my mind.

I felt the pendulum swing.

I sit in front of the mirror, watching my reflection slip the tie under my collar. Pressed, everything had to be pressed, because he and his fondness for disorder have mussed the whole collection of my shirts again, little wrinkles that set in when he still lets my clothes rest on the floor rather than folding them aside, despite my best efforts to, well, train that behavior out of him, I suppose you could call the reward system I have implemented when he does make the effort. I loop the knot: once, twice, through. Beauty in symmetry, but also, I allow, in his stubborn refusal of order. A smile quirks my lips as I finish the knot, knowing that he will undo it. Whether it’s pressed into some doorway, attempting to make me late for our next class, or alone, where shadows slide over the walls and we fight sleep to the last minute, fingers will pull apart my carefully tucked lines and grace me with his flavor of disarray.

I looked up sharply, dragging myself from the taste of memory.

“This is Hannibal’s,” I accused, glaring. I clutched the tie tightly in one fist, suddenly possessive. Crawford grinned and I wanted to hit him. He has no right to take Hannibal’s things, has no right to trick me into an intrusion like that.

“Now how do you know that?” he asked, sly.

“I—I saw him. I reached, and I *was* him,” I stumbled over my words, shook my head, coals of anger lighting. He was missing the point. “How did you get this?”

“Mr. Lecter was kind enough to let me borrow it. I thought it might be easier for you to start with something so,” here, his features flickered briefly into something that was almost a wince, “familiar.”

He'd spent enough time barging through my memories to know how familiar Hannibal and I were, and I felt a stab of righteous pleasure at his discomfort. Good.

"But the point is, you empathized with him, and you barely had to try," he went on, finding his original enthusiasm anew. "The implications, Will—"

"You should have warned me," I said flatly. Fear had completely fled, replaced by cold displeasure. He could reprimand me for my tone, but I was fairly sure that this training itself breached school rules, so we were beyond that realm now. He looked taken aback.

"*Jack*," I added, irritation making me rude. "You shouldn't have tricked me like that. You could've just explained."

For a moment, genuine anger spread itself over his features, and I thought our lesson would end there. But he steeled his expression; perhaps weighing the truth in my statement.

"I'm sorry if my approach seemed... heavy handed," he said, grudgingly, "I wanted to test my theory before you had a chance to stress over it."

I nodded, shook off the traces of Hannibal. I couldn't decide if I was more bothered by my accidental intrusion, or by the fact that he had helped Jack and didn't tell me. A shrug, then, and I tried to bury useless anger, or at least save it for a time when it would get me in less trouble.

"I'll uh, let you return that to Mr. Lecter," Crawford offered as I slipped the tie into my pocket. As though he was letting me, as though he could take it from me if he tried. I felt my lip curl in an ugly, unfamiliar shape.

"Alright. So what now?" I asked, careful to keep my tone even.

It was the question he'd been waiting for. A smile split his face, his dark eyes narrowed.

"What indeed. Well, I could bombard you with ties and quills and any number of lost things from around Hogwarts for the next hour, but I'm pretty sure that wouldn't tell you and me anything we don't already know about your gift."

I noted the *we* he'd slipped in there. True, but for some reason it felt like he was saying *our* gift, like it was equally his and mine to use. As though he would have to deal with the headache after, the echoes of other that would linger, mingling with my own thoughts so that I couldn't be sure which were which.

"*Or*," Jack said, and I knew he had me, "you could come with me to see how a real case works." His eyes were pleased, like he was dangling a treat for a dog.

And maybe he was. I was—*am*—curious about the life I might have. I mean, I grew up with cop shows, detectives. Real-life superheroes. Dad had a soft spot for the older ones, buddy cops, used to sometimes fall asleep on the couch with the footrest kicked up and reruns blaring their swanky feel-good music from the speakers. When I was little I would play with

hotwheels on the landscape of musty eighties velour and rough blankets, making explosions with my mouth and my imagination, and pretend I was catching bad guys too.

And I would be lying if I said I don't feel the briefest twinge of excitement at the idea of going into the field, putting the tangles of my mind to practice. Towards something useful. Because I knew that's what Jack meant; even if he disguised it to himself, he couldn't lie to me. We weren't just going to go observe. He meant for me to use it. Wanted to see if I could take the pieces of a crime scene and slot them together so they made sense.

I hope we're not both putting too much faith in me.

"I… Yeah, I guess—"

"Great. We can meet my colleagues first thing Saturday morning."

My mouth fell open. *Just like that?*

Apparently so. He dismissed me from my lesson right then, leaving me baffled and uneasy, stomach churning with nervousness. I stood in the hall for a few solid moments, staring at the cracked mortar around the doorway and wondering what had just happened. I felt the crumpled ball of green fabric in my pocket, and anger reared its head again, but only briefly. Mostly I just felt wary. I had the distinct sensation that I'd just been worked.

Hannibal was sitting at the little nook where I'd left him only a half hour before; he looked up in surprise when I came through the doorway. I could see it in the arch of his brow, the straightening of his spine as I tossed my bag to land at the feet of the couch.

"You're back early," he said, blandly. He posited it like a statement, but let the question hang between us for a moment. I chose to ignore it, just nodded.

We'd agreed earlier that we would stay in the secret room again, if we could get into it (some nights the door just doesn't appear, no matter how hard we wish for it), anticipating the shaky exhaustion the lessons usually leave me with, the need for closeness and the reassurance of contact. Sometimes his hands on my face, in my hair, are all I need to bring me back to myself, other times it's not so easy. Better to plan ahead, to be where disapproving eyes can't interfere.

I found comfort close to the last thing on my mind tonight, though. The restlessness that had started when Jack smiled at me over his desk had only magnified, and though angry wasn't the right term, I felt *something* that made the thought of Hannibal's hands on me less than pleasant.

I pulled the tie from my pocket and tossed it carelessly in his direction, so that it spilled, still half-coiled, across the papers he'd spread on the table.

"Will?" he asked, voice even, empty of anything except maybe confusion. Feeling the beginnings of a headache brewing, like clouds, singing and electric before a storm, I didn't answer. Betrayal, that's what it was. Isolation. My nerves felt too tightly strung, on the defensive, because I felt like I'd been left out of the conversation, made a pawn—and by

Hannibal, who is supposed to be the one who's always on my side. Resentment, for his part in tricking me; knowingly or not, I didn't want to ask. I was afraid of the answer.

So I kept my mouth shut, shucked my robes and shoes, wrapped in a blanket, and curled on the couch with my back to him. I didn't want to say anything that would hurt him, and so I didn't trust myself to have the conversation just then. I built walls so thick that I didn't even hear him leave when he crept out, giving me the space I'd silently requested.

It was only after a few hours of uneasy sleep, only after I woke cold and feeling the absence of arms that I said his name quietly in the dark, hoping he was perched in one of the armchairs, and knowing it wasn't true.

Without him I feel trembling and untethered, like I might float away. I regret the words I didn't say. I wish I had snapped, or even shouted, so I could hear how silly my accusations sounded with him looking back at me. Anything instead of burying my head in a pillow so that I didn't have to examine what was actually eating at me.

Chapter End Notes

Fear makes you rude, Will. (Although I don't mind at all when he directs it at Jack, tbh)

Chapter 34

Hannibal

Journal.

“Get it together, Lecter.”

Bev’s voice was twisted in irritation, her fingers clenched white along the bow of her violin, which she brandished accusingly now in my direction. Our false starts to this point numbered three, and she had kindly refrained from mentioning that it was I, not her, that persisted in flat notes and sharp sounds, clanging and clashing, not dissonance as it is in the form of art. Simply noise with no direction, aimless. I deset such noise from others. And as it had been my idea to meet and play—there is sunshine sweeping outside and it is finally the weekend—I do not fault her annoyance.

We begin again.

A flat where there should be none, the irritating clash of something too high, a C not complete.

She stops again. Silently this time, her eyes on me. I do not, I admit, shamefully, look at her, idle my fingers over the keys for as long as is possible. The silence stretching. She stares, unabashed, and I play a child’s tune, simple repetition of chords.

“Hannibal—” A beginning but I do not allow her to finish, say flatly instead.

“You must speak with him.”

Another aimless muddle of notes, I let the sound drown away. Still I do not look at her, I am being a coward, just as I was a coward two evenings ago, too cowardly to ask what I had done, or what he had seen, again, to be denied. Too cowardly to wonder if I *had* in fact, contributed. The whispering voices that murmur with growing pleasure that it would be simpler with someone else, the annoyances of something like a conscience that I elect to ignore twisting thoughts behind my skull. Jagged edges which shatter on the ground and ring with *he wouldn’t have to worry about the truth if you weren’t you.* The tie fluid green across the table, mine, of course. But what had it done. What had *I* done? Anger first, always, and I had left, my control of the room fled with my exit, and though I turned again in the space of an exhale, the wall was smooth. Proof enough I should walk on.

“I’m not getting in between the two of you.” I hear the impatient toss of her hair backwards, the cross of her arms as she sets her instrument down. An answering low A in response, hollow darkness.

“You’re *his* friend, are you not? You cannot talk to him? I should think it would make avoiding Alana easier,” I toss out, because impatience makes me snappish, and— that is a lie.

It makes me cruel. I thin my lips. To Bev I apologize. Three angry notes.

“I did not mean to say it.” A breath, another two jolts of sound. “I am sorry.”

She waits, still quiet. I taste the trace of ice, but it melts away fast.

I know she is my friend, also. I know she cannot help the way she feels or how she handles it. I am aware she should not come between us. I should not put her there.

“But he will not talk to me.” Admissions come sullenly and ache more than I care to admit against my throat.

There. That is the truth of it. That I won’t admit, that he won’t admit, whatever it is he believes he is protecting; from me, for me? I do not like secrets, journal. I thought that we had long ago had our fill of them. It pushes stress into the lines of his face, and makes him hard. Makes him as stone as I am capable of being, *he has learned well, was he always capable?* He holds himself back because it is the same cruelty that I fight to suppress that now bubbles in him, threatens to break. The unbearable need to lash out, to fill an emptying hole with satisfaction.

I would allow him cruelty, I believe, to a point. But I do not understand it. So often my inability to see all the parts of his mind pleases me, warms a thrum through my blood. But it is only exhaustion that fills me today.

“He will not talk to me.” I repeat to show that I am brave, to run salt over an open wound without a wince. If I am capable of forming the words perhaps I am capable of owning them also. A stray piece of hair falls into my face, but I feel as if lifting my hands from the piano is a task too much. “But there is something wrong.”

Something he won’t tell me. Some piece that he does not trust me with, what had he said? All those days ago, wrapped up in blankets. A distant dream. *You won’t stop, and I won’t want you to.*

Something about me.

Something about me is wrong, something about me is pushing us apart. Something about me that I am not aware of, or perhaps I am.

“He has been quiet,” She agrees from what seems like a distance far away, as though I am beneath water.

“He has been far.” Press whatever is beneath my hands, make sound, pass another moment.

We did not discuss my leaving, we did not discuss my tie, we barely spoke at all. Every exchanged laced with poison, a draw from him something sour, the sight of me enough to well it up. Easy indifference.

No colors of mine wrapped around his body this week, a casual shrug as I stood, the sun not yet even set. To retrieve a book from the shelf, not to go, but then— *Don't forget your sweater.* Dismissal and rejection.

“Hannibal,” Her voice is hesitant, unsure in a way that tells me she’s uncertain if it’s wise to broach this topic at all with me, not now, perhaps never. I remember the sting of her slap from a year ago. It had seemed hopeless then, but I believe I am more nauseated today.

Another was the problem then.

“Do you... I mean, do you know what’s gotten to him?”

I am the problem now.

I laugh, fingers against the piano in a slam, not a total loss of self control, I fan them at the final moment, the footfall of her step away, but close.

Another truth that occurs to me, that I have not voiced.

“I believe that he is discovering a few realities of our existence.”

It comes out low and unwavering. Frightening, in a different way than I was. Frightening even to me.

Her touch comes cool on my skin. A step towards me then. Foolish.

I look away further, but she’s insistent, shifts my chin until I am facing her finally. Her unflinching gaze.

“And what are those?”

“That ignorance and distraction make me human.” Bland as though the words do not bother me, as I though it did not matter that I had always acknowledged them, but trusted that Will thought otherwise. Do I even really wish to be so?

“Whatever he’s seen—” *In me, in someone,* “—has convinced him of the ephemeral nature of such a state.”

He thinks it would undo me. His knowledge, that he keeps for himself, he does not trust me with it. And with the acknowledgement that I can be undone, he must accept that he was wrong. Stunningly, I am not enraged. It only seems to follow as I say it.

Her fingers squeeze into my cheek with sudden brutality and I hiss, but in truth, I welcome the sensation.

“Hannibal Lecter, I should slap you again.”

If only that would fix it.

It is too late to wish to not be human, because I miss him. Though he is with me, I miss him with an unbearable ache, and there’s nothing but me in his way now, me, and himself.

I spare her a tight smile and move away, the catch of a flowery scent filling the air.

“You should go,” I look back to the keys. “Alana’s waiting.”

In the end they both stay, exchange conversation with their eyebrows as they are so capable of, do not discuss me aloud, do not discuss themselves, talk idly about the niceness of the weather and quidditch.

And I sit, grind another tired stream of sound from my fingers.

H.L.

Chapter 35

Will | *Interlude*

I meet Crawford by his office, and it's cold and bleak. Today's Saturday, most of the castle is still silent, draped in sleep at such an early hour, leaving the halls quiet and eerie as we make our way out. And cold, god. Cold of the kind that seeps through the castle walls and draws chills through me, and then more, when we step into the outside air, it freezes in my lungs, the early spring morning crackling with frost.

I'm glad that Hannibal could sleep in, since I didn't exactly tell him about Crawford's proposal, draw up an image of him sprawled in his blankets, and it's almost enough to warm me; a small, weak smile. But I also wish that I'd had him with me when I crawled exhausted from my own bed. Our not-fight left me with very little rest, and mostly just a tired fear that I'd hurt him.

I blink stupidly in the gray morning light, clouds threatening a frigid rain, when we walk the wooded path to Hogsmeade. Jack explains what we were doing, that we'll travel by portkey; but my mind is far away, reviewing the note I scribbled thirty minutes ago in the bleary before-coffee moments.

Hannibal,

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shut you out. I know anything you did, you did because you thought it would help. I just… I don't like being left out of the loop.

We step into a pub that's conspicuously empty and Jack goes straight to the bar, gestures for me to stay back while he speaks in hushed tones to the owner.

Crawford is taking me to a crime scene today, and as you can probably guess, I'm equal parts curious and terrified.

Jack comes back over to me, holding a battered travel guide.

"They've got everything set up on the other end. Are you ready?"

I nod, despite being suddenly unsure. A sense of unreality has muffled me, his words feel like they are coming from a very long way away. We step out into a little courtyard behind the bar, and I feel the first tiny, needling sprinkles of rain on my cheeks. I wonder what we look like to passerby—a skinny boy in Slytherin colors and a big, boxy man clutching 1000 Places to See Before You Die like it's scripture, crouched among the cobbles and lemongrass.

"Will," he says, finding my eyes. "Put your hand on the book."

He holds it out and I comply, he consults his wrist-watch.

I know I acted like a dick the last few days, but I'd really like it if I could—well, if you want to see me tonight. After. If you need a little space, I understand, and really, who am I to begrudge you that?

"In a few seconds you'll feel a tug, and things will get a little confusing," Jack says, "but the important thing is; **don't let go.**"

But… Hannibal, I need you.

Jack waits until I nod again, thin-lipped, thinking about what might lie on the other end. He raises his brows and smiles a little. I can see the gap between his front teeth.

"And Will?" He claps a hand on my shoulder. It's a motion he's made dozens of times in the years I've known him, but something is different. I don't feel the urge to shrug off the contact, there's nobody around to impress his approval on. Not a motion of ownership, just one of reassurance. I'm surprised to find I'm grateful for the weight of it.

"You're gonna be fine."

I return the smile, feel the pride and excitement that fills him brush at the edges of my own awareness.

Love, (Always. Even when I'm intolerable.)

Will

And then the world pulls apart.

Chapter 36

Will

When we resurfaced from the whirl of the portkey, I gagged emptily, hands on my knees. Crawford hovered in a way that I was familiar with; it's the same thing Dad does when I'm sick. Hands out but not touching; not wanting to assume I need help, but ready to jump in just in case.

"It's a little rough the first time," he apologized, awkward laughter woven through his voice. I struggled back to control, tried to focus on the solidity of the ground beneath my feet. The air was different here, not quite warmer, but softer. Wet. The smell of salt was brisk, and I slowly became aware of the distant crash of the sea.

"Sorry," I choked, embarrassed, "sorry, I'm fine."

I straightened slowly, only when I was sure I wouldn't lose the scant contents of my stomach. We stood at the bottom of a grassy hill—cars parked across it haphazardly in a way that would be disastrous for the grass—at the top of which sprawled a house. I don't know what I was expecting; police tape? Chalk outlines? Things that I'd come to associate with crime scenes from my time in the muggle world but, upon thinking about it, would be a little pointless in the place of magic.

People were milling around the overgrown yard, but they weren't what I'd expected either—un-uniformed and, to my surprise, dressed like muggles.

One of them caught sight of us, beamed, and headed our way, feet slipping slightly in the damp grass.

"Jack!"

He extended one square hand to Crawford. I, still reeling from our choice in transportation, tried to stand straight, hoped I didn't look too much like something that had just washed up, limp and heaving for breath, on the shore beyond. The man enthusiastically shaking Jack's hand was blandly attractive; a squared jaw and expressive eyes making up for what was an otherwise uninteresting face. Nothing like Hannibal's angled, otherworldly looks, but pleasant. And oddly familiar.

"Brigham," Jack said, adopting a warm, friendly tone that I have seldom heard, and it clicked. He was older, certainly, fine lines beginning to work their way across his face, he had shaken the last traces of gangly boyhood that had clung to him in Jack's memory, but the face was the same. He had been at the scene when Hannibal was found, had maybe even been the one to lift him from the snow that day.

"I'd like you to meet Will Graham," Jack said, freeing Brigham's hand to shove me forward. Gray eyes rested on me briefly, and he offered me the same courtesy he had Jack, nearly

crushing my hand.

“Sir,” I said, shy though I can’t explain why. Brigham smiled warmly,

“Nah, none of that, Will. You call me John—you’re a member of the team today.”

He winked at Crawford over my shoulder, and I felt my face redden.

We followed Brigham up the narrow path through what looked like an herb garden, though it was haphazard and interspersed with moving, squeaking, and snapping plants that you would not find in Memaw’s neat rows of chives and chamomile. On the front porch, wind chimes rang against glittering green and blue seaglass, making a melancholy sound. I should be afraid, I thought, and I was—well, wary at the very least—but more than that, I was morbidly eager.

Brigham stepped through the front door into the dim house, the floor creaking beneath his feet, and gestured for us to follow. As we did, a cool, fluid sensation washed over me, and I blinked, startled.

“Repellant Charm, you’re fine,” Jack murmured behind me, nudging me forward again.

“Oh yeah—sorry, I should have warned you,” Brigham said, turning to face us without breaking stride. He navigated easily through the entryway backwards, dodging as two wizards lugged a slightly melted cauldron out.

“I’ll need you to put these on,” he directed, a lazy flick of his wand pulling a box of white gloves to hover in front of us. He stepped around a shattered mug next to a white tag labelled “12” in spindly handwriting, eyes only leaving me to glance occasionally behind him. He waggled his fingers, “Prints, you know,” before pulling his own pair from where they dangled in his back pocket.

“Now, typically,” Brigham went on, ducking under a doorway into the next room, “if you were an auror, the department would have already sent you a file to review, but since you’re a new member of our team, I’ll just brief you quickly now.”

I nodded around struggling with my gloves and trying not to think about the gesticulating man in front of me anywhere near my briefs.

We had circled through into the kitchen, where several witches and wizards were busily going through cupboards and scribbling notes; quiet, business-like chatter and the scratch of quills. My stomach clenched, and though I was of a height with most of them, I felt very small, knowing I didn’t belong here. But a few of them looked up in surprise, even awe, as Jack stepped in behind me. He nodded solemnly to them, sending one young official’s eyebrows so far up her freckled forehead, I was afraid they’d never return.

Brigham reached behind him, grabbed at the railing of a cramped staircase tucked against the back wall, and started up. The stairs, at least, he took forward-facing.

“The victim is a witch,” he said, voice echoing as he rounded the landing, “Rebecca Young, thirty-eight, lives alone. A writer, I think she did those—” He trailed off, looking back at Jack helplessly as we followed him into the upstairs hall. The windows on the right let the only light in, the same bleak color as the sky. Iif I looked out, I could see the town nestled among the hills, and beyond that, the grey-green line that was the sea. Jack raised his brows, forehead crinkling in the shadowy hall, and Brigham’s face reddened incrementally.

“Well, you know, those Victoria Evans novels.”

I bit my lip, fighting the fleeting image of the kind of paperback Memaw would rip the front cover from before taking in public; the kind with a profusion of pastels, long hair, and unlikely phrases like *throbbing member*. I’d picked one of them up, out of curiosity once, and almost died about twelve pages in, though I think I spent an entire week referring to a particular part of Hannibal's anatomy with increasingly creative terms pulled from chapter five. (This was met with a rolling of eyes, and a suggestion that if I was interested in such smut, he could produce far more appropriate material, though I can only imagine what *Hannibal* would turn to for this kind of thrill.)

It seemed to mean little to Jack when I dared a glance back at him; he only nodded sagely, face carefully empty of anything. Though I could have sworn I felt a brief flare of amusement.

“I don’t read much,” he said casually, “they any good?”

Brigham barked a short, uncomfortable laugh.

“I wouldn’t—” he paused just outside a closed door, “well, yeah, actually. I like them.”

The smile he wore when he turned around, blocking the doorway, was sheepish, but genuine. It faltered though, just for a moment, when he added,

“Well, *liked* them, I guess.”

He shrugged off the moment of solemnity easy enough, though when he looked at me again, the smile was a shade less than it had been.

“Now Will, if you feel at any point that you need to leave, you just say the word. This is supposed to be educational; we don’t want to scare you off before you even graduate.”

His tone was light, bordering on joking, but his eyes flickered to Jack as he said it, and I wondered what conversation they’d had before our arrival. Wondered, not for the first or last time today, how much influence Jack still holds.

“I’m ready,” I told him, voice steady. It wasn’t a lie—I wanted to see what was behind that door, if only to get it over with. I heard Jack’s pleased hum behind me, and something in Brigham’s expression looked unbearably sad.

He nodded, and opened the door.

I had steeled myself for all manner of gory scenes, with the shadow of Hannibal's still seared brightly in my mind. Ready for walls painted with shades of viscera, some kind of tragedy made from what was once the writer of the Victoria Evans novels.

I let out a relieved breath as Brigham ushered us in. It was just a bedroom. A canopy bed dominated much of the space, the curtains fluttering lightly in the salt air. From the walls, several paintings peered at us curiously; girls with dancing ribbons in one, a woman conversing with something large and slimy that peered its head out of a lake, a very bored looking Ophelia floating on her back among river reeds.

Little pieces of a life grabbed my attention; a glass of water on the nightstand, a strand of shells and beads hanging from the headboard, the patterned lace on top of the dresser.

And then, as we moved further into the room, my breath caught in my chest. There was a woman. Her hair spilled in short, dark locks over her face, she lay on her side on the floor by the bed. She looked like she could have simply fallen out of bed and decided not to get up; there was nothing violent about it.

But still, the wrongness of it was just starting to settle in when Brigham knelt next to the body, so close I thought his knee might crush her curled hand. Even as the warning built in my throat, it went straight through her. The entire corpse shimmered briefly, translucent, and I realized Ms. Young was not really there. It was just magic, and of course she wasn't still here, she'd been dead for two days now.

Brigham went on to tell us the details of how she'd been found, and upon receiving a very pointed look from Jack, I quietly wandered the room.

I could not empathize with Ms. Young. She was no longer there, her mind not available, not projecting her thoughts, feelings, wants, fears, for me to pick up on.

But at the same time, the memory of her skin still lingered in the sheets, the sound of her typing at the ancient looking typewriter on the desk was embedded in the wood. A symphony of impressions she'd left behind, that I could hear, see, feel, if I tried hard enough. In that way, Rebecca Young was all around.

Granted, it would have been much easier if I could actually touch, but it was still a crime scene.

I looked curiously at the manuscript stacked on the desk, at the page still sticking out of the top of the machine.

It seems that all great revelations happen in the most

She'd stopped mid-sentence. I frowned, couldn't help but feel that was odd. But then again, the only writing I've ever done is in this journal, so what do I know about storytelling?

To the left of the typewriter, on top of several rings in the wood that suggested coffee cups left to sit too long, was a little round gold frame, from which a photo of two smiling girls waved. Five or six years old, their arms wrapped around each other, swaying back and forth

as they grappled affectionately. Bright, careless smiles filled their faces. Their feet were buried in sand, and I squinted at the photo, past their faces, pink with sun and wind, at the rocky hill behind them. Was that dark speck on the horizon this house?

For some reason, the picture made me feel impossibly sad—the kind of sad you can only feel about a childhood memory. The ache in your chest when you realize you can never have it back.

Maybe the photo was of someone Becca—and it was *Becca*, I knew, not Rebecca or Ms. Young—had lost.

"Did she grow up here?" I asked. I was mostly just thinking out loud, and only after I said it did I realize I'd interrupted, and both Jack and Brigham were staring silently at me over the fallen replica of Becca.

"I'm… not sure, I'd have to look at the paperwork," Brigham said, eyeing me curiously, "what makes you say that?"

A sharp look from Jack, and I shrugged, pulled my jacket a little tighter to myself.

"Just a feeling."

Brigham nodded, slowly, but if Jack expects to keep him in the dark about why I was there, I think he's kidding himself. The guy is an investigator, after all.

"We found her wand here," he continued, eyes sliding off me and returning to Jack. He pointed to a tag labelled "8" next to Becca's left hand.

"And get this—Misuse of Magic ran it this morning, and the last spell used was the killing curse."

I watched the two men as they conferred, letting the cool wet air clear my head of the thoughts of snow that danced cruelly at the edges of my consciousness. Jack's brows drew down,

"Suicide?"

It was the obvious conclusion, but then again, we wouldn't be here if that was the case. Brigham shook his head, lips drawn tight.

"Look at the eyes."

Jack and I looked as one, and he lifted the doppelganger's hair gently from her face. The image shivered again at his touch, but when it stabilized, blue eyes were wide with terror.

Something ugly tugged at me, and I went.

Rage. It boiled behind my eyes, twisted my words into clumsy, stuttering things, made to hurt, but blunt and ugly. Looking into her eyes and knowing that she didn't understand, she had nothing to say to me. That she wanted me gone, dead for all she cared, so long as I

wasn't here. I was nothing. Anger tore itself against my caged and rocky mind until all that remained was a terrible, empty ache.

I gasped, sharp, and pulled myself back from memory, stumbled back and almost crushed a saucer labelled "3" on the floor.

Brigham leapt to his feet immediately, and I have to hand it to him—he looked genuinely concerned for me, not the evidence.

"Will, it's alright," he soothed. I blinked until his eyes didn't look the same accusing blue as the not-corpse's, but a neutral, pleasant gray once more, until the shivers of anger had faded somewhat, only coals in my chest.

"Here," he added, the hand not holding his wand outstretched placatingly. A swirl of his wand arm and the body disappeared entirely, leaving the dark, bare floorboards, "It's gone, I'm sorry."

I realized he thought I'd had a reaction to seeing Rebecca Young's face. Gruesome as the expression of horror frozen on her features was, I was embarrassed he thought me so fragile.

"No, it's, I'm not—" I started to argue, but Jack stepped closer, placed one heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay, Will?" he intoned in a calm, steady timbre. But of course, that's not really what he was asking, with his brows raised and a smile dancing at the corner of his mouth. I met his reassuringly dark eyes, and nodded, still shaky. A silent answer for a nonexistent question. He really did smile then, let it broaden his face, and I couldn't help but mirror him, though mine felt a bit false, unsure.

"Well," Brigham said, clapping his hands together in an over-bright gesture, "I think that's pretty much it up here. Let's see about a cup of coffee and the substances report."

The rest of the day, I was kept carefully from anything that might be considered frightening; in other words, anything that might have been genuinely useful to me. It was interesting to watch the men and women at work, true, but I am not an auror, nor an investigator with their department, so there was not much else I *could* do.

Little, flickering impressions of Becca Young snagged at me everywhere, and with them, the memory of the other would light again in my chest, the twisting of anger through my core, like the two were as tangled together as the string of beads in her room. These, I kept carefully to myself. Betrayed no outside sign of any insight, empathy related or otherwise, though I did accidentally correct Brigham once, only to say that she was in fact, left-handed, so the placement of her wand made sense.

I am certain that, when he pulled Jack aside for a moment, he was telling him how much he disapproved of my being there, despite the warm smile he offered me when they came back.

He shook my hand again when we readied to leave, told me he hoped to see more of me in the future. I smiled and lied as well, telling him I was certain he would.

Chapter 37

Hannibal

I am surprised, at first, when Will comes home unshaken. The ominous shade of his letter, the weight of the tired script, the days of silence that had led up to it, all leaving me with rather the impression he would in some sort of pieces upon his return. And so I paced the day away, woke as early as he, on some unknown brush of feeling, or known perhaps, the constant tug of our connection, and watched the sun as it traced the sky.

Where had he gone? To a case, to see the sprawl of bodies and unseeing eyes. For a moment a quiet jealousy takes me, a curiosity that rears its head now and again as though it has always been lurking, present even when unacknowledged. The darkness of magic tantalizing, loud in the beats of my heart, the layers unseen to us in classrooms, behind desks, surrounded by the droning of professors; *real* magic. Magic with power.

The power is in me, that I know, and in Will, too. But corpses, I decide, with a shudder at a sudden chill which comes from within not without, are not a good place for Will. Not alone. Not with Jack. A curl of lip. Jack who does not understand him at all, nor his magic.

What will he see at the crime scene? The thought twists through me again and again as the cool light of morning turns into the long shadows of afternoon. If they have summoned Jack, the minds of those present will have long fled. Will the evidence be enough, the breadcrumbs of a life once lived sufficient to recreate the last gasps of breath; the picture in the cracks enough? I imagine him as an artist, plucking layer after layer of color from nowhere, scarlet, scarlet drenching his hands, and shaping them onto a canvas.

And then the image changes without my express consent, and I am before him, the strands of blood plucked from my skin instead of an empty room, imagined. Is that what he hides from me? Am I a crime scene myself when his eyes fall on me, the remains of a ravage, enough open wounds and craquelure to find the hidden shades of color, the reddening light to shine into the holes? Does he examine me the way Jack hopes he will the rest of the dead, and see the truth? It is not the first time I have thought this, but with the backdrop of the case, it seems almost undeniable.

Unpleasant truth, the tingle of the curiosity murmurs.

I shake the tremors of the unheard sound away with my wrist, an empty motion into air. The distance between us needs no help from me and the idle musings of my mind. My thoughts stray back to worry for a time; is he safe? Is he ready? But eventually I settle at my spot and stubbornly work until I am lost in it.

Relief then, when he opens the door hours later, perhaps it is late. A blink, and I see the light has gone, decidedly late then. I squint up at him. He certainly looks worse for wear; bedraggled, yes, exhausted, but he’s smiling, his little sort of crooked turn of mouth,

watching me. I remain sitting, unsure, for the first time in a long time. Should I rise, reach out?

I do not enjoy uncertainty as a rule, and it sours my stomach now as I apply it to Will. Unhappiness curling at the notion that, for the first time in our more official relationship, I am unsure if my touch would be welcome. He has scarcely spoken all week, and when we have, more barbs than anything else. I am ready to forgive and forget, I watch him carefully, but I perhaps will not tolerate it prolongedly, as he would not from me. His casual cuts have a way of sinking deeper.

“Hello, Will.”

I murmur, finally.

The spell breaks.

His eyes widen, a rush and fall of emotion, and he steps forward, one movement of foot, another, crossing the boundary, crossing the distance that had been present between us, slow progress, but he moves, shifts through the air in the room as though it is pushing him back, until he is before me. Then a a hand, a hand onto my skin, curling around my chin, as Bev’s had days ago, around the faint cuts her nails had left, soft, the welcome callous of his skin, my eyes shut against it, and I know we are friends again.

“I’m sorry.” But it’s lost between our lips, soft, between our lips, sweet, and for a heartbeat, for a perfect suspension of time, though he is sweaty and muddy, and I am sore and stagnant, it is as though the last few weeks have not occurred. No secrets. He does not know too much, and I do not hold too much that might be known, we are only open. My teeth grazing his lips, and his own digging back, earning a gasp. His hand has shifted from my cheek to up, past my temple, into my hair, and I am pulling him closer by the hem of his untucked shirt, it is moist in my grip, he smells of earth and salt, of something else that perhaps I only imagine, tinged of iron.

What did you do.

I murmur hours later, when he is scents of himself again, of my stolen shampoo, and his insistence on a particular muggle soap the room is all but too happy to provide. He is warm in my arms, warmer than I remembered when I was holding nothing at all and wishing for the welcome weight.

Somewhere deep I berate myself. For being weak as this. Even still. For *needing*—such a dangerous thing, I know. *I* know. To need. But if this almost fight we have been having has proven anything it is that I am ready to bend backwards instead of standing unyielding. It is that I do need. And sometimes the facts that seam our world are simply not changeable. I bury my head in his neck and hope despite everything, despite anything, he needs as well.

Just went to a crime scene. A shrug of shoulders. Saw the procedure, that sort of the thing.

A pause, a pondering, as though he is forcing himself to make the words that wish nothing more than to crawl back down his throat. Would be casual, but their presence eases

something in my chest.

Saw the projection of the body, the room she died in.

And.

And I was...was... For a moment. I was the killer.

The tightening of arms. A cold shudder across skin.

But I swear, it's fine Hannibal, Jack took me away. I didn't see anything else, nothing even pulled at the empathy for the rest of the day, I was just bagging books and stuff.

It's fine, I'm just tired.

And it is fine.

Until the precise moment it is not.

I did it. He sobs into my arms, the clock strikes three, the screams have barely faded away, ring in the air, in the hoarseness of his voice. He is here, he is not. He is far away. And his eyes stare at his hands as though they are drenched. In the moonlight I can see the blood as clearly as he can, the anguish falling in cries from his lips as he twists, screeches and kicks.

I KILLED HER.

IT WAS ME.

Though I cannot say how—

as I try to calm him, though he will not be eased until the first light of dawn strikes, shaking and crying, gulping,

—I know he is not talking about his writer of books.

H.L.

Chapter 38

Will

I haven't been sleeping well, as of late. No surprise there, not really, with Jack running over the case details, again and again. Our lessons have ceased to be lessons in occlumency and become a practice in patience.

"Why do you say the victim knew her killer?" he asks one night. It's late, and I have a rhythmic pounding in my head, and I just want to go back to the dormitory and sleep for about a year. I know that as soon as I'm there, though, as soon as I relax the strict patrolling of the shadowy halls that make my mind, others will slide cold fingers against my eyes, lay heavy on my chest so I can't breathe. They will wind their way through me, and this is how I wake now, thrashing, after only the barest, most restless snatches of sleep.

Sometimes it's Rebecca Young, in her last moments that reaches to me, but more often, it is not. Mostly I wake, aching not with fear, but with hate, and I can still see the body fallen in front of me, eyes wide, mouth frozen forever on a plea she will never finish, and I feel nothing but a creeping sense of righteousness.

I smile, answer Jack in a tone that is light only because it is hollow,

"Because she thought of her as Becca."

And the killer is in me, in that moment, she is smiling at Jack with my lips, and the terrified part of me that is still *me* is so small and distant that I'm not even sure it *is* me at all. I don't mention the obvious, that she had put the wand in Becca's left hand, as someone who had not known her, and well, would not have. Or that Becca drank coffee, the stains of it in rings next to her typewriter, and yet there had been both a mug and a teacup shattered on the floor. Not common to offer your killer a nice beverage before going on with the murder, in my understanding.

No, I gave Jack what he wanted to hear, and the truth of it is, I only noticed these things *after* I'd let the killer claw her way into me, crouch behind my ribs.

"She?" is all Jack says, and she and I roll our eyes as one.

There are others, too, now that I've welcomed them in. Motel for murderers, that's what I've become. Sometimes, when my own screams pull me from sleep, it is not Becca Young I see, but bones in a soup pot; two baby teeth floating in the broth.

Other times, I am Hannibal, and I rend apart with a flick of my hand, and screams turn to symphonies in my fevered, hate-wracked brain.

On those nights, it is the hardest. When I reach lucidity at last, clamber, exhausted, back to myself, I can't even curl into his reaching arms, press hot, tear-damp cheeks to his chest as I

want to, because when I look at him, his eyes worry-soft in the dark, I feel…

Fear.

Fear that I'll give too much away, that he'll look at me and see what he's forgotten in order to survive. Fear of what that knowledge would do to him, that there is still some of that white-hot hatred racing in him, in me, what it could do if I let it. The power it could have.

And yes, in the moonlit quiet after the screams die, I am afraid of *him*. I am afraid of *two got away*, and what that would mean, if I gave that knowledge to him. He is beautiful, and he is dangerous; this I have always known, from the first crackle of magic in his palms, that chased bullies away. But there are shadowy corners of him where even I dare not tread, that he is, perhaps, not aware of himself.

And I am afraid that, in time, I will lose him to it.

Chapter 39

Will | *Interlude*

“Will,” he whispers, his fingers reaching to press warm pads to my cheek, and, shivering in the wake of a nightmare, voice hoarse from screaming, I flinch away from him.

Hurt pools in the tightening of his eyes, in the thin line of his lips. The contact is broken, drawn away, and it leaves cool spots where his warmth was. And I can’t stand that, that pulling away, so I roll on my side, the sheets whispering beneath me, and reach for him.

Not with my mind, I’m careful about that, with the echoes of a little girl’s sobs still in my head, but with my body, at least, I try to bridge the gap I’ve caused. My hands slide over his neck, down his chest, and it’s good to feel him, remind myself that the Hannibal that is laying with me, in the chill of spring that seeps through the walls, is not the one in my nightmares, all burning eyes and cold edges. A kiss, which he returns gratefully, too, my mouth desperate to feel him warm and sleep-heavy, eyes drifting closed even as our lips press and pulses quicken. He sighs into it, I want—I need more of that, and so my hands find my way under his buttons, skim against his stomach where muscle draws tight in surprise.

Good too, that thought is chased to the far corners of me, good to taste needy sounds on his tongue and nothing else. My hands find his hips and tug, press us chest to toe. The motion slides his waistband down beneath my palms, an unintended but welcome motion that reveals him in inches, a band of skin beneath the hem of his shirt.

I rock slowly against him, a rolling of my whole body, while my fingers dig into the newly bared skin, and he pulls back from the kiss. His eyes are still closed, his lips parted, and I groan as he says my name again, this time through a gasp.

I push him onto his back, roll with him, legs across his lap, and our mouths clash again. There is something thrumming through me as I kick the tangled blankets from between us to the floor, tear my shirt over my head, and lay his open, slide it from his shoulders.

It is something like fear, it is something like power, it is a lot like love. It brushes through my blood when I lean over to kiss him again and feel his heart pounding beneath me.

“Will,” he says, one last time, and it is only a quiet breath between our lips. A surrender and a warning in one, thick with wonder that I so desperately want this, now, with traces of violence still trickling through my veins, echoes in my ears.

I can’t answer him, other than to tell him that he is an anchor. When I feel his quickening breath against my neck, his hands tight in the tangles of my hair as I drag my lips across his chest, down, lower, it reminds me that I am here, he is here, and since I can’t give him this truth, I try to tell him in other ways.

And I want to give him more than this—even as my mouth draws a moan from him, a shift of his hips up that leaves me unable, momentarily, to draw breath around him—but I know, hands shaking, hips rolling into the cushions beneath me, seeking heat and pressure, that now is not the time for negotiating boundaries, discussing thresholds uncrossed. It would not—a soft noise in my throat, still, at the thought of having *him, and it shudders through us both—would not be fair to push when all I'm really doing is grasping for some kind of tether. Selfish, a closeness that I can't reach only because I'm refusing it by locking myself away.*

Something aches in my chest as Hannibal's sounds crescendo softly. His head rolls back and his back arches, and I feel the shock of his release spread through him distantly as I feel it pulse hot on my tongue. I love him so, so very much. I wish I wasn't what I am, sometimes, or at least that I didn't know what I know, so we could pretend there is nothing so dark and terrible in the world. In us.

He's very quiet, after. I hold onto him like a lifeline, and his hands are soft in my hair, but his eyes are coal-dark. Turning something over in his head. I think nonsensically—it is almost morning, now, my eyes drifting closed—of wind chimes and seaglass, and shattered cups.

"Will," he says, into the cold and the dark. His voice is low with sleep and sex, but there's something awful and vulnerable about it, too. I can't meet his eyes, and so I measure my breaths, pretend to be asleep. "Did you only touch me," his throat catches oddly, "to prove that you still could?"

I think of fingers finding my cheek as I woke, of flinching back, in fear, or anger, or both.

I do not answer him. At some point, we find sleep.

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

Journal.

The distance grows.

We patch it in increments, in moments of touch that do not manage to melt the layer of ice that deepens, in the twining of fingers, slow, careful, soundless, that unites us for seconds. But the distance is stronger than we are, surges loudly, as Will's lessons continue, as the consequences of his power, of his mind, that I love so much, draw him further, draw him away.

Away from me.

Towards what I remain unsure, but the prophecies my thoughts create ring of only doom. A house built on sand, the faint creaking of cogs in a machine that is pulling us closer to some fate. Spring is in the air, but winter prickles along me. The overcast skies more welcome than the false face of the sun.

This is not good for you.

I might wring Jack Crawford's throat for this, for meteing this fate across our shoulders. If he were no longer involved, if he were not involved from the beginning, then perhaps we might salvage it where we stand. No more nightmares, no more cases. No more of Will's clenched teeth and his locked thoughts. At least they would not grow.

He is not himself some moments, I am sure of it. Someone else entirely when he wakes in the night, sometimes familiar, sometimes foreign. But it is Will whom I desire. Will and no imposter. He is *mine*, I murmur quietly to the spectres that still dance when he falls back into fitful rest. He is mine and no ghosts nor demons, no haunt of death may have him. I am the only haunt of death that will claim him. But without his allowance, there is little I can do but hold him, grant physicality when he turns with wild eye and all but begs for it.

We're okay, aren't we?

I do not answer that one. Some things, as he knows, should not be granted answers. The words clench my jaw, turn my back. *No*. I tell the pillow. The twine of bodies is nothing without the twine of minds, to me; nothing. Not even the barest of similarities between the two, and without the latter, the former even less than dust. The hollow pleasure it brings, the falseness, the baseness. It leaves me feeling empty beneath my skin. He asks me to be an

anchor, and yet he will not share what roiling waters pull him under. Walls, walls between us again, when we have promised no more, and did we not learn?

He seeks to bridge them, I know. Tries to reach over them, through the glass in what ways he can, hands in the night, lips and tongue, but all the while he lays layer after layer of mortar and I cannot feel him when he touches me.

This was never why I loved him. The thoughts choke, leave me without air, strand me on a strange brink that I cannot express and cannot repress all at once. A clock ticking loudly in my mind. Tick, tick, tick, tick. It waits, and I wait. Nothing to do but wait for the moment when we shatter or grow whole again. But impatience is not a kind cloak, nor a fine look for me. In the corners of my eye, I believe I see books shaking in their shelves, hairline cracks forming in windows. Frustration made palpable in the howling of the wind. But certainly, it is only a trick of the eyes.

Certainly.

It is raining now when he trudges in, dragging his bones. Shoulders low and slumped. I attempt valiantly not to see in the colorful clarity my mind is capable of how this afternoon should rightfully go. I have, in fact, been wasting a rather lot of time in my mind, to escape the strain of the noose around my neck. Imagining, recreating sunshine days that have slipped away, picnics that did not come to pass, laughter that was not heard. I lie across his stomach and find the clouds, the sea laps against a rocky shore. We are very far away, the image glimmers, so easy to snatch... But it won't do to have him catch me in the act.

It would hurt him, I think. To see the reflection of hungry want in my eyes. The brief satiation imagination creates, the fading away in increments.

Though he hurts me, I will not return the unkindness. Not as I might have once.

Tick, tick, tick.

"Jack wants me to go to the crime scene again tomorrow."

It is announced as though in preparation for a fight, and naturally that raises the fight in me. Will's eyes are deadened as he stares in my direction, through me, I do not think he sees me at all in that moment. Just the weight of everything pressing around him.

Calm into my voice, strained and injected.

Tick.

"Jack would forgive you if you refused." Casual, I tilt my head up this time, but a sort of urgency comes into me from nowhere, from the particles of air that choke me as I breathe them in.

"Inform him you are busy. It is the weekend, we might have had had plans, you might have wanted rest, or homework. We could leave..." I do not know where the words spring from. "My Aunt has a house not far from the village, we could visit—"

But he isn't listening.

"I don't have a choice, Hannibal." A wearied construction of words, rehearsed, but also, I think, as though he would much rather do anything else, including socialize with a corpse, if it meant he would not have to go away for the weekend with me.

Oh.

And then a narrowing of my eyes.

"Well, I believe it is a terrible idea."

I should not have snapped, but on occasion the words do as they please.

"Why, because I'll get to be useful?" A shot back, at the ready. There's a bitterness there I can't quite parcel out, but I can't seem to understand a whole lot of him of late, so what is one more word? "Help someone maybe understand what's happened to someone they love? I know you're against doing good or whatever, but even you could probably— "

My arms are crossed and I'm standing without realizing it, outside the thunder rolls, lightning crashes bright, I pretend the tremor that rattles the mirrors on the wall is from the storm.

Will takes a step back.

"Yes," Soft and silky. "Yes, you know how I hate when you're useful. Kindness a detestable trait."

"Hannibal—"

"Or perhaps."

"Hannibal, I didn't—"

Tick.

The rattling rises.

"Perhaps it is because you wake up in the night and you don't know where you are, or who you are. Perhaps because you have gone and returned, and you flinch from me." He flinches, but just at the moment, I am not sure he isn't justified in it. "And you turn from me and you lock me out, keep secrets." My shoulders are drawn, he looks so small to me just at the moment, lost and afraid.

I would crush him, I could. Could crush him, and beautifully, but instead I exhale. Fall back to earth and let gravity bind me.

"I keep no secrets from you."

He is hurt, he is hurting, shuddering before me, neither confession nor condemnation from his lips that tremble.

Soundless for a moment, before in determined stubbornness he forms.

“I’m going. They need me, I can figure out the truth. It’s… it’s important. To me.”

Tick

I nod mutely. Say nothing more on the subject, nor about the book that lies on the floor which had only moments ago rested on its shelf .

“We should go to dinner. You must be hungry.”

To the truth then, and all its consequences.

Tick, tick, tick.

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

Another triple update today as we spiral towards the end of the year. ~~I hope you liked that interlude as much as I do.~~ I do want to scream at both of them during this segment; at Will for keeping secrets and not trusting, at Hannibal for demanding so much. They can't just have nice things. And that *tick tick tick* at the end made *me* shiver when Ro sent me that chapter, back in May.

Thanks to those who have kept reading this far, I get a big goofy grin when I see your comments <3

Chapter 41

Will

Salt on the air. I don't feel sick this time, as we whirl back into existence at the bottom of the hill.

"You alright?" Jack asks.

She nods my head. She is here, behind my eyes and all around, whispering, she stretches my lips into an unfamiliar grimace of a smile. Hannibal would have noticed in a heartbeat, the difference, but Jack just nods, and I wonder if he ever really cares about the answer to that question, or if he just asks out of habit.

Hannibal. A sigh as we walk up the hill—no cars today, no laugh-lined eyes—that is entirely my own. There are times when I look at him, and he seems alien to me, unreachable. I will crush myself against his edges, I think. And he cannot tolerate weakness in others, in *me*, it bores him. It is the reaction of the mundane to the extraordinary.

You do this to yourself, his mind whispers, even as his arms wrap stiffly around my shaking shoulders.

And he casts me an ultimatum, him or Jack, as though that is what this is about, and not the memories I shoulder for us both. For someone so steeped in gray, he seems to see things as very black and white.

"Refuse," he tells me, as if a day spent in weak sunshine will mend this growing gap. And I look at him uncomprehendingly, for the first time in my life.

It's not because of Jack that I have secrets, it's not because of the work. I keep them so carefully because of the fear of finding myself with my wand pointed at *Hannibal* one day, of a world where I can only see him in the glistening details of a crime scene, or through the shadow of bars.

I see the wistfulness, the aching he tries to pretend he is above, and I hate him for it. I hate him for acting so inhuman and yet being so human. No secrets, nothing kept to myself, he demands, all the crackling in his words and rattling on the walls. All of me, his. He expects me to fear him, and in the same breath needs me to love him. Embrace my gift, use it, fill the potential of my power, but only in such a way that suits him. He has no taste for the messiness that accompanies it, the weakness it fractures in me, the nightmares and the screams. The tangle of contradiction in his thoughts, on the occasions that he lets me feel them still, becoming less and less as the days pass, it's maddening against the backdrop of other voices.

Doesn't he think I also long for easy days by the lake? For letters, for laughter, for impromptu concerts and tangled limbs beneath autumn skies, I would give *anything* to have that back. To

have never seen more than the barest glimpses of his life before, for it to have stayed in his nightmares, left me guessing, only dreams that I could chase away with a blanket around his shoulders and a warm body to cling to. Bitter, it makes me bitter, that he cannot abide by pieces after he promised, that he must swallow me whole.

In my lowest moments, his disappointment cutting at me, his confusion, both of us gilding things with anger because it's so much easier to handle, I wish I could unlock what I've hidden, let flood the torrent of things unsaid, the sharp edges and the screams, and shout at him until he's forced to look too. *See?* I imagine telling him, giving him all the darkest corners of myself and of him at once, let someone else decide what to do with the knowledge of what he's done, what he might do. What *I* might do to keep him. *See?*

"Refuse," he says, looking through me as though this is the last time we will speak, and instead, I cut petty lines with my words, because it feels good, for a moment, before the guilt settles in to stay.

He will leave you, the specter in my mind whispers, as we step into the house.

I know. That is the only end to this path, we will destroy each other or we'll fall apart, if nothing changes. The people that love you are not exempt from weariness, and I've got problems enough to wear out even the most patient. My dad put me on a plane, it is only a matter of time before Hannibal, too, ceases to find me fascinating and begins to find me taxing. To withdraw to a version of me that he created in his mind, one that bends instead of crumbling in brittle pieces.

That's not fair some small part of me argues, the part that is still wholly me, untainted by the anger of killers. The part that is aching at just the thought of him, wants more than anything to apologize and bury the last few weeks.

But the snarling in my head is too loud, building now that I'm inside. We step through the doorway, they've cleared everything away, but Jack goes to the living room, ghosted with plastic, and I turn to the stairs, my heart beating time against my ribs. I feel her close, even more than before, pressure on my psyche, the pressing of hands and words not my own, and I feel myself retreating into shrinking spaces.

Better to be alone she hisses. I shake my head; a blink and I am in the bedroom, unsure how I got here. The room is empty, sterile but for the brush of Brigham and his team.

"You were alone. But you came back. Home, remember?" I say aloud, to the empty room. "You needed her."

And look where it got us she spits. I brush fingers over the beads on the headboard, across the bare mattress. The desk is empty now too, the typewriter and grinning girls gone, pale spaces on the walls where portraits hung. She retreats for a moment; never completely, I still feel the shadow of her heavy in my every thought, have to question how much is really mine, but for the moment, it is a silent pressure, and she is far enough for me to feel regret.

For a moment.

A breeze rustles the curtain, and I wonder why they left it open.

Somewhere in the house, a door closes.

I start at the sound; it's probably Jack, he's downstairs, staying near the front door. I have the distinct impression we're not supposed to be here, and he's keeping watch. Yes, it's probably Jack, I think, but even as the words form, I know in the core of me that it's not.

A calm settles in me as I cross the hall. No rain today, the sun falls through the window in bright panels, dust motes drifting like tiny flecks of gold, and I pull my wand from the pocket of my robes.

I kick open the first door. It's a bathroom, emptied of the traces of life. No shadows here, no monsters.

The next is only a closet.

There's only one door left; the one right at the top of the stairs and my stomach clenches. A hand to worn wood, there's time for one more panicked thought of retreat, but I swallow it down, clutch my wand with shaking fingers.

When I swing it open, she's there.

We've shared space for weeks, and now she is given shape, this killer who was just breath and dust. She is all wild eyes and dark hair, familiar, the slope of her jaw and set of her eyes so much like her sister's that for a moment I am terrified that it's not the killer, but Rebecca Young before me; that I have crossed the threshold from *unstable* into really, truly insane.

She snarls as the spell starts to leave my lips and she is quicker, her magic stronger. The wand flies from my hands, clatters down the hall. In an instant, I am scrambling for it, enough of myself left for self-preservation, but she is on me, fingers clutching at my shirt and she knocks me to the floor; I feel the shock hard through my knees, and then my chest, my head against the hardwood, my glasses crack against my nose. She fists a strong hand in my hair, yanks back hard, my throat is exposed and her wand presses sharp into the thin skin under my jaw, and I'm trying to breathe, but her weight is heavy across my back, and my throat is tight, bobs as a gasp of air tears into me at last.

"Where is she?" she hisses, voice rough. She smells like mothballs and dead, crawling things, and I don't know what she's talking about, my head is ringing with impact and I can't think around the hammering loud in my ears, the wrenching pain as she tugs me even farther back.

But the ghost of her in my mind is loud, stronger now, and she realizes that she's talking about Becca. A laugh rips from my throat, delighted, strange and cruel.

"You killed her," I tell her, voice tight with fear and something else, a self-hatred that happily tears her down, "Becca's gone, you killed her."

"*Liar*," she keens, but the raw animal sound in her voice echoes with awareness.

“She never gave up on you,” I hiss through my teeth, the roaring in my veins. I don’t know where it’s coming from, this vitriol, I want to believe it’s all her, that I’ve completely lost control, but there’s a wounded, angry part in me that goads her in place of another, her words mingling with my own, her pain mixing with what I’m already filled with. Another wordless cry from her, the wand digging sharper, and I’m not sure what I’m saying but the words keep pouring out, *she loved you, she tried to save you*, I can’t stop them, and I am giddy with the destruction. It feels so good after so much slow crumbling.

Until she’s had enough. It screeches from her mouth, I’ve never heard it spoken aloud..

Crucio

And words leave me. I’m tearing, gasping, knives and needles instead of flesh, and the world contracts into a solid, white-hot point of pain. I’m screaming, or sobbing, or both—none. There is no air, the breath too painful to draw, fire in my lungs, in my limbs, in the nails that draw splinters beneath them as I try to drag myself away.

I want it to end. *I* want to end.

And for I moment I think it has, it *has to* have, because I’m not in a dusty hall but on a shore digging through sand with child’s hands. I am watching a gull pick the legs off a crab, one by one, with open curiosity. I am doing the same, many years later, to a family of muggles while their mother watches, frozen mid-scream.

I am tired, I have been running for years, but at last I am home, looking up the hill at the house our parents left us, and Becca is handing me a cup of tea, but she says—she says, tight-lipped, *you can’t stay here,* and the rejection tears through my gut.

Everything goes very dark.

There are hands on me, lifting me, *Jack*, I think distantly, a sneer, and I tell him something, but I’m not sure what it is, maybe I don’t even say anything, it’s just in my head. There is a body on the floor in the hall; hers, mine, or maybe Rebecca Young’s, we all have the same blue-eyed stare, and *not dead* Jack murmurs *just stunned* as if we are not so far, far beyond that point now.

A hoist up, I’m hurried out, to the portkey, I wonder if he will even tell anyone I was there. Likely not. He says, voice rumbling, in place of an apology *Go to the hospital wing* and leaves again; his spells will only last so long, after all.

I do not go to the hospital wing.

“Will,” Hannibal says, surprised, when I walk in the door. I don’t know how I knew where to find him, feet just followed some trail unknown, a classroom we once used for birthdays and potions practice, where we—his hair ragged, my hands reverent—mended a gap that was so much cleaner than this is now. For a moment, he looks—he looks hopeful, as though maybe I’ve changed my mind, maybe I’ll apologize, spill my secrets, let him cradle me against him in some sick, fucked up version of the truth where my fears are very small, are fixable by a kiss, a solemn talk, by the weekend spent alone with him. I want to cry, but my eyes are sore,

red, already dry, and there's a roaring in my skull, insects chittering, eating holes and, always, the murmuring—

Better to be alone.

We're two Death Eaters short.

She will taste good.

His next words stop in his chest when I crush him to the wall, a terrible sound of screaming in my head, and when he looks at me *I want to hurt him*. Magic crackling between us, I press him into the stone and at the last minute, screeching, some part of me worming its way through the others pulling at my fists and shaping my words, I change course. I open his mouth beneath mine, buttons snapping under my hands, clattering to the floor I don't know what I'm doing, acting on impulse that is me and is beyond me, from somewhere inside that is desperate for that exact scenario, to fall into him and let him fix this, tell him everything and love whatever monster comes from it.

He's still for a moment before returning the kiss, and that tears into me, the lag in reaction, the realization he's only surrendering, and the shine of weak hope recedes. My mind is as ragged and raw as it has ever been, and yet I feel nothing from him; no desire, no intimacy, just a moving of muscles in the appropriate order. I fade, slide back into darkness, a dry sob, and the whispers begin again—

She's dying anyway

"Sorry," I murmur, thickly; hating him, hating myself, and I don't know what I'm apologizing for, who is doing the apologizing, because despite the ruined shirt, the bruised lips he presses fingers to, I am angry. A killer's words echo soundlessly through my head, the rattle of a voice *he will leave you*, rejection in blue eyes, and I know that it's not him, it's not me, but it's all confused, a double image and he's the one laying on the hardwood floor in a house by the sea, then it's *me*, glassy eyed, surrounded by the damp soak of my blood.

He already has.

"No."

There are other echoes too, and I should be shutting down, pulling away, I need to keep those walls, the storm roaring. I can't remember why, but I cannot let him hear the small voice crying his name as they drag her back to the house, cannot allow him to see the remains of a cauldron, the bones at the bottom, Brigham's younger voice saying *We're two death eaters short.* I grit my teeth and try to pull order together. I say something, my voice grinding out unbidden, "Shut up!"

Hannibal says my name again, worried this time, hand outstretched but not touching, command in his voice, and it's always been enough to pull me back to myself before, but it's never been this loud, and I hear the shatters, the laughter, see the stag with its empty, black eyes. I want to drown out the others but I am afraid if I block them out, there will be nothing left in the cradle of my skull but silence, emptiness, nothing of me, and so I grab wildly for

something close enough, something recognizable, something that does not look down on Becca's body with a sneer.

I grab *Hannibal*. My mind twines with his, and it's painful, it's sudden and violent, and he is in my every breath; *mistake* something screams, this is exactly what I've fought, and the shadows are too loud, his mouth falling open and his eyes looking nowhere. I am him, and I am open to him, he sees it all, too much, swirling, all of it at once, and—

In both of us Mischa's screams do not stop.

I drift somewhere between existence and dust, time that is lost to me. And when I am myself again, aching cold seeping through my clothes from the stones where I lay, Hannibal is gone.

Chapter 42

Hannibal

I leave him there.

On the floor in a heap and I go.

Tear myself away with force, wrenching and awful force, because my mind reaches back behind me, is reaching still, wanting, crying, to fill all those foolish gaping holes I created in myself to fill with him. All this time, all that knowledge. *Lies*. Lies of omission. Lies outright. Truths and lies, all mixed up, and I am unsure if I ever asked the right questions, did I not ask him to tell me? Did I not beg to know truths? And when truths were denied, to simply forget, cease to push his powers in the way that he has, in the way that has led us here. *Go*, I said. *Let us go*.

And he went instead, and he left me. Came back full of something dark, but not himself, voices tangled up, and with a curt laugh that turns the heads of those in the hall. *But they know better, better than to look, better than to try and stop me*. Chilling and empty, a laugh. And I am but another one of those voices. Those voices that twist through him and turn him into something he is not.

We're two short.

It echoes loudly and a window simply shatters. There are screams around me, confusion, but I am moving. Forward. Dimly, there is awareness that my lips are sore, that my shirt is hanging loose, buttons everywhere. *Me or them* inside of him. Will would not shred the buttons, but I would, but *they* would.

Suddenly, I know with the same acuteness I knew in the night, that they have filled him. Her killers. Through me, through Jack and through *me*, they pulled at him to see, filled his mind with their taint. *Touched him*. It screams from me. *Touched him like they touched her.*

Teeth in a cauldron. And snow and ice, and the leer, of faces.

The walls close in. The air turns leaden in my lungs. The magic is spreading. Somewhere Will is on the floor, where I left him. And I— I am about to explode.

The magic dances like fire along with the memories, searing fire, and it's spreading. Hot in my brain, but I know where it's going. To the dark spaces, to the memories, cues that weren't there before snaking tendrils into the holes in the floors of my mind, a torch cast down into the darkness, but it's caught something, something burning. And it is far too late to stop the spread now.

Away. distantly, it occurs to me. Though I could not remotely care, at this very moment, if I were to explode, if the whole castle were to be eaten by the fire that is raging, if every last

teacup shattered on the table, glass strewn everywhere. I could not care, but I am no longer inhabited only by me, and a voice that isn't mine, louder than the screams, but not for long. Will be drowned too, but for now, louder.

Hannibal.

And I listen to it.

Pause in the middle of the staircase. I do not see anyone else, perhaps they exist, perhaps they don't, and maybe an authoritative voice is loudly growling my name, but a cabinet comes crashing down between us and I do not have to hear it any longer.

My hands in my hair, if only I could silence her screams so easily.

Hannibal, you have to leave.

I am not maddened enough to think Will is with me.

I left him on the floor.

But his voice is enough to push, and I am moving again, maybe outside there will be enough air for me to breathe. Though I know that it is not the air, the air is fine, it is only my lungs, only my mouth. Only I. That is all wrong.

The sun is warm on my cheeks when I finally stride into it. Inside my mind, it is chaos, everything is falling, the neat order yanking down, tapestries and paintings, paint stripping off walls, the lovely wallpaper borrowed from the Parisian Opera House, the careful order of my books, philosophy, literature, music, the fire sets them a burn. But outwardly, now, outwardly, I am stone, striding, as the walls come down, layer, after layer, every door and defense gone, and in the lightless places the light is moving. *Far*, I need to be far, when it finds the memories.

Perhaps it would be better to forget. My aunt's voice.

You'll want too much, and I'll want to give it to you. Will's.

But is this not me? A treacherous hiss that is me, a me I do not recognize, but I know. A me I could be. Older, taller, vicious. *Powerful*. Built off of this. Off of the connection of these memories, the me that I will build over them when I know them. When I cease fighting and allow what Will saw, *from whom? from whom?* to meet what I saw, what I have always known, but have tried to forget, first reflexively, then with choice. But there is no choice anymore. No amount of ice that can prevent the ends from meeting and the circuit complete.

She screams. She screams in my mind.

There are teeth in the cauldron. Pain snakes through my bones, *crucio*, pain. Pain and laughter.

They have magic, they do not need knives or blades to hurt, they do not need to touch my body, but the pain of the mind is not enough for them, and the door slams onto my arm,

crunches sickly.

Down into the snow.

She is screaming.

I let them in.

Opened the door.

We were hungry.

She is *screaming.*

Mother was dead, and father. And the winter was coming. Creeping. Screams and coughs.

A child's voice.

I loved her.

Crucio.

"Crucio."

I stop, and I see him in front of me, and I see them in front of me. And she is screaming, and before me, someone is screaming, but she is not my sister.

"Now, now, Margot, we don't want them all to hear you."

Dimly, I know I am not in the snow. It is spring and I am fleeing, I do not wish to hurt, me or Will, and I know that I can, that I would. I am almost to my Aunt's house, the house where we would have run to, but there are people in my way, though I have steered clear of the main streets, taken alleys and corners to avoid exactly this. There are people in my way, and the word stops me.

I am screaming on the floor, in the cold, the dirt cakes my skin, seeps into every last inch of me, she coughs in their arms, eyes wide.

Her eyes are wide as she screams.

"Let her go," I cry from the floor, throat raw, my torn clothes around me, my body mangled, but still I crawl forward.

"Let her go." I say calmly and Mason looks at me, I see him, and I do not, I see him and he swims before my eyes, and it is them I see.

"This is a family affair, my dear Hannibal. I would not—"

"She will taste good," he laughs, "You will see."

"—Interfere. unless you would like to…?"

“A fine stew for the winter.”

“Are you not hungry?”

She cries. Before me she cries, inside me *she* cries.

Teeth in a cauldron.

I take a step forward because I know distantly that I am not in the mud, in the snow, that I am whole, that I am capable. I know, but I do not know who is in front of me anymore, who is around me, all of it burning together, tangled unbearably.

A step forward and without lifting my finger. There is a thud, a body flying back against the stone of the alley. Mason’s shocked huff of breath, angry yelp into the air.

“Oh,” laughter, ugly and tainted with fear, “You are *really* going—”

“Oh,” fingers rough, gripping my cheek, my teeth bloody, a gash in my arm, just above the ugly mark. My whole body throbs, but I do not care, I bite again. “You are going—”

“...to regret that.”

Fingers snap bone into two.

“Crucio.”

“Crucio.”

Except this time the pain is real, the screams are real, they are mine and I think I am laughing. The pain is bright, it rakes down me, through me, unbearable, but I was exploding already, was I not? And this, it presses all the pieces together. Memory they say can be accessed through the pathways in which it was gained. It would seem this is how I gained these memories.

We are going to eat her, Hannibal. We are going to have her for dinner. She’s dying already, isn’t she? And we’ll have you next, don’t think we won’t.

They came in the night, and we were alone. A raid after a war I was barely old enough to know, they came in the night, to loot, but there was so much snow. Too much to clear away with magic and to apparate would be to alert the ministry. No choice but to stay, but the food was low already and we were so far from everything.

Crucio.

The pain is terrible, every cell, screaming, every last hollow, every breath.

I see her from where I writhe on the floor, in their arms. I see her and I hear her scream, screams that cut out, then the crackle of flames.

The hatred sears in me. I yell and I cry, the blackness is already encroaching at the edges, because my body knows what the hatred will bring, my arm pops back into place, my bones mend themselves, and the chain breaks, wrenches itself away from my neck, cold metal and a scar. I am bleeding, I am starved, I am a child in the snow, but the hatred pushes me forward.

They are guzzling something in the yard when I find them.

Laughter, they grab me, and the warmth of soup rolls along my lips. I spit, but not soon enough. The hatred swells.

And then he flies into the air.

And then they fly into the air.

The pain is still rushing through me, I am crying and I am laughing, and skin is falling like rain from the sky. She is only screaming my head, but the screaming around me is real. The blood is scarlet on the snow, the satisfying feeling of organs shredding, of skin liquefying.

The blood is scarlet on the snow.

The blood is scarlet in the road.

He is in the air.

He is lifting.

In my head, I am alone. Some of them run. Two gone, I know. But I am too focused on reaching for the rest of them with my magic, thrusting them up to mutilate. Curious delight as I find I can unwrap their skin as Mischa once unwrapped a present. I am alone in the snow, with blood, with my sister dead in a pot, with the aching of hatred and grief in my lungs.

I am alone on the street.

And then I am not.

“Hannibal.” The word is urgent, my brain momentarily setting aside its other pursuits to happily bond with it, to fill those holes. And I see what he sees in the road.

No snow.

Only a crying girl. And a monster of a different sort, falling from a height now that I am distracted, his face deformed, unseamed forehead to chin, large splotches of liquid, skull and skin, fat and muscles, dripping off of him, liquified in a sickly color.

“Oh.”

I say calmly. And the magic explodes into fever inside of me. The whole of the world shifting, twisting and turning, melting to black and taking me with it.

I see nothing but fire.

And in the background, a child screams. I do not want her to be by herself.

So I scream too.

And perhaps I am laughing.

Chapter 43

Will

It's very quiet here.

I've never liked hospitals; as a kid, it was a terrifying experience, especially given my particular talents. All that pain, all that desperation, the fear. The dull resignation. This one isn't any different, really, except that we're on a level marked "spell damage," which I don't think you find in a typical muggle hospital, and the doctors that have come and gone, in a swirl of lime green robes, have not seemed to do much more than wave their wands.

Hannibal hasn't said much. I want to brush his hair from where it's spilled, but he's sleeping, the potion they gave us doing its work even as it tries to do the same to me, heavying my eyes and softening the edges of my thoughts. Maybe I don't want to admit it, but I'm also not sure how welcome my touch would be. The shirt folded neatly, impersonally by a healer is sitting on the only other chair in the room, and I can see the missing buttons, the loose threads. I feel sick everytime I look at it, but haven't been able to move it. I wonder if he's dreaming, I hope that it's peaceful, that it has nothing to do with what my nightmares will be filled with tonight; the animal sounds of pain, Hannibal slack and empty, collapsing. Mason...

I've never seen magic like that before. Well, not through my own eyes. I try not to draw parallels, to see this as a pattern that started in the snow and ended with knees on blood-wet cobbles. Something *tore through* Hannibal; he didn't use his wand, there were no words. Just power, raw and crackling, and the sick noise that the mass that was once Mason Verger made when he hit the ground. I don't know what happened to Margot or Mason after they brought us in. Nobody will say anything, the healers just smile far-away smiles and tell me not to worry about that yet. To sleep.

They will come for Hannibal, they could come at any moment. Fear is a terrible beast, and in me it grows, clouding out the sun when I try to reach for the stream, the spread of antlers blocking out the sky. Hannibal did this, but I feel blame settle heavy on my shoulders, press me beneath the sick, still waters until I gasp water that tastes of copper, and I am only a corpse as well. And still, that heavy, wet sound. I think I'll hear it the rest of my life.

"How do you feel?" a healer asks. She's just come in to write on a chart, it seems. There's two beds in the room though, and I realize, after wondering why she's asking Hannibal when he's clearly asleep, that she's talking to me.

"Fine," I say, quiet, because what would she write on the chart if I told her about corpses and creeks, and of drowning while we wait for answers? I can't quite manage a smile though, I know already how crooked and flickering it would come out, so I don't even try, just keep my eyes on Hannibal, on the in and out of his breathing, a lifeline. She watches me, eyes warm, and something in me has dulled, it seems, because I can't feel anything from her when I prod, carefully, for hints. Radio silence. I wonder if I've broken my empathy, over-used and

stretched beyond its capability, at the crime scene and then in the classroom, in the blurry moments that are barely there. There's a quiet relief in the thought, though I can't quite let myself hope that it's permanent.

"You should lay down too," she says. I want to scream that sleep is not going to help, unless it can somehow erase the last twenty four hours and let us start over.

She leaves, and I wonder if the dim lighting is a ploy to trick me into rest.

Jack Crawford came to visit. Twice. Not to check on Hannibal, of course. The first time, he pulled me bodily into the hall to demand to know what happened. He still smelled like salt air, his robes rumpled. I shrugged, tired already, and I told him half-truths.

I don't know. I wasn't there. I wasn't myself.

The last, I said with a look up at him, the implication clear, and his mouth thinned, he took a sharp breath in through his nostrils.

"Will," he said, very calmly. His hand twitched, I thought he might rest it on my shoulder, his way of letting me know that he's on my side. How paternal. I thought if he did that just now, I might bite it. He apparently thought better of it.

"This could get very, very ugly," he went on. "I don't want you to be caught up in it, with *him*, when it does. You have your future to consider. Do you understand?"

I did. I do. He wants me to go back to the castle, to leave Hannibal here and let him deal with whatever happens next on his own. The OWLs are in less than a week, and the train only days after that, but even the thought makes my stomach twist up.

Jack's eyes were soft, too, as he said it, and that's the worst part. I can hear him reviewing what he would say in his mind, and he was honest, at least, he truly wanted me out of harm's way.

And yet, he cared nothing about Hannibal. What makes the two of us so different, that a teacher could feel justified in judging a sixteen year old that way? How could anyone expect him to be better if nobody has ever believed that of him? I thought about telling Jack about the snarling that had filled my head that day, the rage. About torn seams and bruised lips, and about what might have happened, had *I* stumbled across Mason, and not Hannibal. If that roiling that had filled me had met with Mason's mind, had found not love when it reached, but a dull and rugged landscape of cruelty, Mason would not be in a hospital, I'm sure of it.

He'd be in a morgue.

But all the chances taken on me, all the trust, all of Jack's belief and hope, why? And I came very close, then. I almost lay the whole thing at his feet, his mistakes and mine, so few of them Hannibal's. But if Jack won't help me, I can't help Hannibal. It's not time to make more enemies.

I will not help them put him in a cage.

“Sir,” I said instead, quiet. No anger, only stubborn resolution. “He wouldn’t leave. If it was me.”

The second time Jack visited, it was very brief, only to drop off my bag, stuffed with books.

“You’re still not skipping your exams,” he’d growled, and that was that.

I’m glad he’s kept his distance. He was gone when they brought us in, presumably helping Brigham’s team make an arrest, though that is so very far from my caring right now. A part of me is crumbling under the fear that he’ll see Mason and connect it with a very different day, with snow and chains, and a silent, shaking boy he barely remembers. I don’t know what I will do, if we have to fight Jack as well as whatever else lies ahead of us.

My hand finds its way; sluggishly, hesitantly, across the covers to where Hannibal’s rests. It feels like the whole world will be against us soon. My fingertips brush along the familiar ridges of his knuckles, slip into the space made by the shell of his palm. I want to be closer, suddenly, I need him to open his eyes sleepily, and berate me for mussing his hair, pull me onto the starched-white bed with him and wrap sleep-heavy arms around me. I can deal with the rest once this coldness in my chest, the fear that it’s not they, but he that will send me away, thaws. All I need is one word, one look, to know that we’re together on this.

I think the potion, at last, is dragging me into rest. The healer will be pleased when she comes back to find us both asleep, even if I’m slouched heavily in the chair, hand twined with Hannibal’s, and not in the other, sterile bed. But I’d rather her not find this book open in my lap, so I think it’s time that I put it down.

Chapter 44

Hannibal

Journal,

Will is not there when I wake, limbs sluggish from false sleep, heavy with pain, a dull throb somewhere in the back of my head. I do not enjoy being unclear in this way, I do not like my sharpness being taken from me, the sterile pajamas of the hospital, the scratch of the bed. I do not like any of it, laying wan and exhausted, awaiting the next dose. A part of me knows it would be worse without the potions, the numbing edge to the fever that rages inside my body, that the memories would be overwhelming, and what occurred could—

A panic rises somewhere far, viscous and dark, but I cannot fully grasp it yet.

Will is not there when I wake, but you are, on the table, and the nightmares had abated somewhere in the night, so I assume he cannot be far. But he is absent from my mind and from my room, vanished with the dulling glow of magic, and so I am alone. A small groan as I shift, try to rise enough to sit.

“Hannibal.”

The voice gives me pause, from a corner I had not examined in my fog. But it is enough to clear some of it away, to have my muscles stiffen, ache swallowed back. I push myself up and lean against the pillows, carefully emptying away anything but the blandness at the surface.

“It is rude to lurk in shadows,” I tell Jack as though we are having a casual discussion about my grades. “I do not believe I invited you into my rooms.”

I cannot help but allow my lip to curl, an acerbic edge to spread beneath my words. “Or have you come to administer my medicine. I did not know *retired* aurors played nursemaids for soon-to-be criminals.”

“You’ll get your potion when I go.” He tries to be as calm as I, but I can tell I irritate him, or disgust him, or both. Right beneath his skin, I crawl. It’s a petty victory, and I should likely not indulge in it. But the strain of everything is bearing down on me, despite the induced calm that holds the brunt of the terrors at bay. The screams, Will’s lies, the rage that surged through my veins made manifest.

“If you stop behaving like I’m inconveniencing you, Hannibal, you—”

I open my mouth to tell him I’d rather without anyway, and perhaps to ask if he really believes threatening me is going to be conducive or, judging by recent history, a sound choice. But I am cut off because as though on cue, and it is, I know it is, there is shouting from the hall, angry footfalls and the nurses placating tones.

"*HE RUINED MY SON. HE DESTROYED HIM, I AM GOING TO TEAR HIM LIMB FROM LIMB, THE LITTLE MONST—*"

There is a moment of scuffle, more of the like, and it is quiet again

I look at Jack, Jack looks at me. My face is blank, I only blink. I do not bother to pretend anything but the truth which is that Jack allowed who I can only assume to be Mason's father to get that close to me.

"Charming," I tell him, as he scowls. "A reminder of what I've done; is that meant to scare me?" False innocence, perhaps a little humor.

Do not look at me that way, journal, I was not in a particularly good mood.

He rounds on me at that, breathes angry breaths and clenches his fists. I only stare up at him and wish I could stand too, that I were not already tired of sitting up straight, my body in painful throbs, my muscles unable to sustain me. He could hurt me in this state, he could do as he pleased, but I know he will not. I can trust he will not and that gives me the advantage, at this moment I am willing to take it.

"It *should*," The words are growled as he leans over the cot, glance against my skin. "You mutilated a classmate, Hannibal. He is in intensive care, *you sent him there*."

Spat anger, he is so certain I am guilty, I can taste it in his tone. That I purposefully set out to do this. I did not. But I will not be sorry to have done what was not in my control. I will not be sorry that I turned Mason's own terrible behaviors against himself. Rude. Rude and crude. Deserving of no better fate. "You had better pray he survives the night. And you could try looking like you give a damn."

One close of my eyes, another, I tilt my head at him.

"Do you mean as you do, when you speak to me?"

My arms cross, I am growing weary of this conversation, of Jack's presence before me. I want Will to come back, I want some quiet, I want to think without the impediment of the potion. But I cannot have any of it, so I turn the tables.

"Perhaps if you were less concerned with your place in the ministry, you might have spent a little less time tainting Will with your own selfish wants, and a bit more helping me control whatever it is clearly *overwhelmed* me." A thoughtful hum, and I confess, I cannot help myself.

"Perhaps this is your fault. Do you think the ministry would like to hear where Will was when he came to me out of his mind and slammed me against walls, forced the magic from its place?"

He goes sallow—an interesting look for him—and then he puffs his chest, I have hit and we both know it.

“Yes,” The answer comes low and I lift my eyebrow. “Let’s talk about what’s good for Will, you and me. Because from what I can see, you don’t care about that at all.”

A narrow gaze for that. A lie. It is no wonder that is what he can see, because he can see very little at all. Could not dream of understanding what I think or feel for Will. I stay silent. I do not need to tell him so to know that it is truth.

“I’m sure that’s really what he hoped for, a boyfriend that hacks off people’s faces and doesn’t even feel the need to say ‘I’m sorry’ for it.”

I do not acknowledge that now he has hit.

“That blinks and dark magic comes out.”

It hits, that perhaps that is not what Will wants at all, that it is not me that he wants. That I have managed to fulfill exactly every fear he held about telling me the truths he kept away. That he kept them away because he did not want me to turn into this, that he did not want me to turn into this because then he could not want me. That now that I am this, and it would seem that I am, he will go. The thought hits with sudden anguish, but I attempt to parcel it away. *He has not gone yet*, I remind myself, find the air and continue my calm. *He has not gone yet*.

Monster, Mason’s father had shouted from the hallway. Perhaps.

Perhaps it is only a matter of time.

“And won’t even give enough of a damn to try and pretend to be sorry, because he’s so stuck on himself.”

I pretend he isn’t speaking. I stop listening, find a particularly appealing spot in the ceiling and focus on it instead. Leave my mind and step into the buzzing rings of nothing.

Surface only in time to take in the last of his words.

“They’re going to have an investigation Hannibal, and there’s going to be a trial. I suggest you consider changing your tune or you will not like how it plays out.”

He goes. The nurse comes.

“I want Will.” I tell her, attempt to demand. But she’s too busy nodding and smiling, pushing the potion to my lips.

I try to fight the weight of my eyes. I want to see him. I want to ask him if he’s going to go, the potion makes my thoughts muddle. I would tell him, right now, I would tell him to please stay. I won’t later, I know I won’t, when my mind is back and my walls are high and my fear is great. We will not talk about it, and he won’t know, and I won’t say.

If he came right now, I would tell him.

He doesn’t.

I sleep.

H.L.

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